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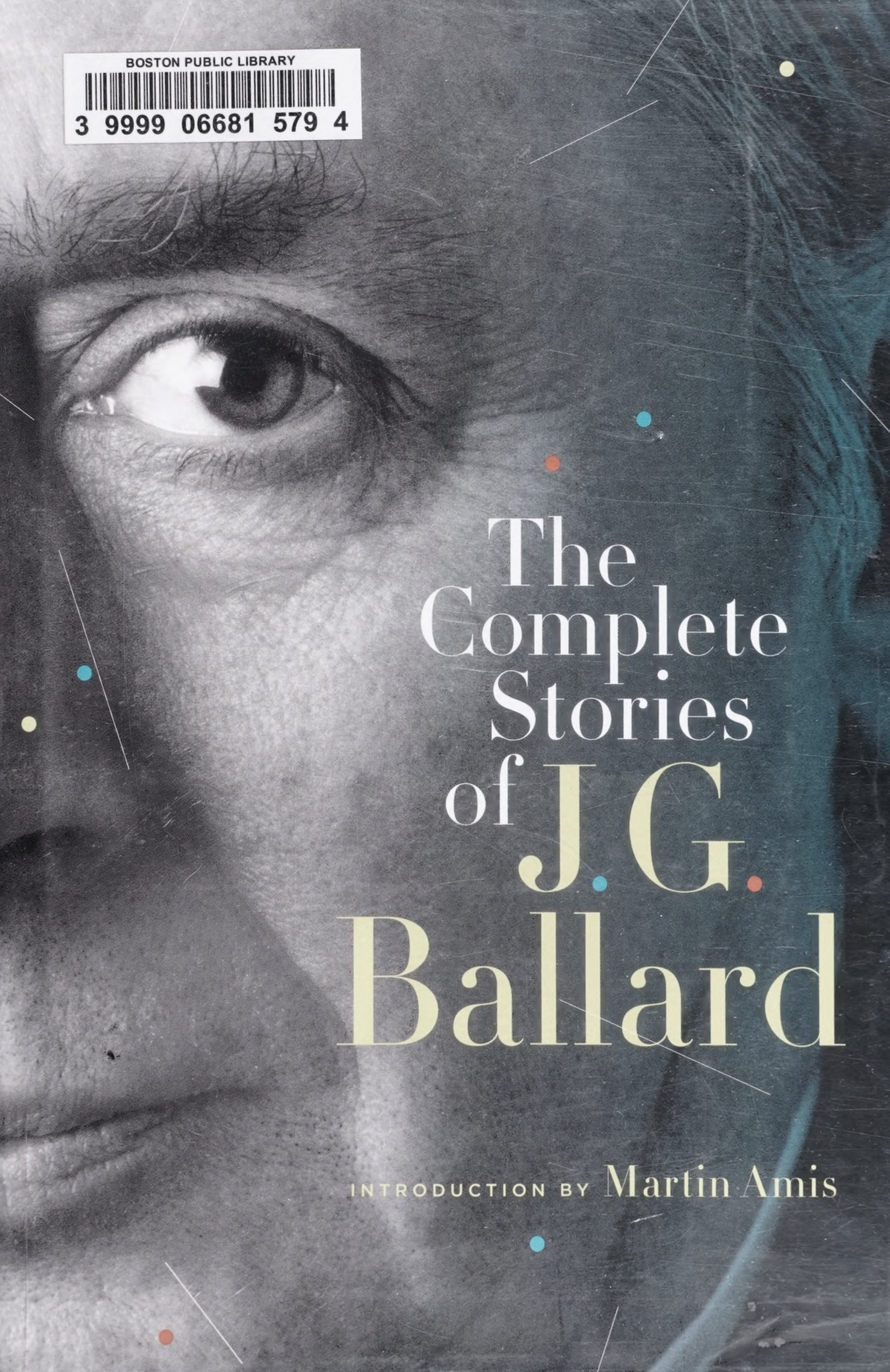

The Complete Stories of J.G. Ballard

INTRODUCTION BY Martin Amis

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The American publication of *The Complete Stories of J.G. Ballard* is a landmark event. Increasingly recognized as one of the greatest and most prophetic novelists, J.G. Ballard was a "writer of enormous inventive powers," who, in the words of Malcolm Bradbury, possessed, "like Calvino, a remarkable gift for filling the empty deprived spaces of modern life with the invisible cities and the wonder worlds of imagination."

Best known for his novels, such as *Empire of the Sun* and *Crash*, Ballard rose to fame as the "ideal chronicler of disturbed modernity" (*The Observer*). Perhaps less known, though equally brilliant, were his devastatingly original short stories, which span nearly fifty years and reveal an unparalleled prescience so unique that a new word—*Ballardian*—had to be invented. Ballard, who wrote that "short stories are the loose change in the treasury of fiction, easily ignored beside the wealth of novels available," regretted the fact that the public had increasingly lost its ability to appreciate them.

With 98 pulse-quickening stories, this volume helps restore the very art form that Ballard feared was comatose. Ballard's inimitable style was already present in his early stories, most of them published in science fiction magazines. These stories are surreal, richly atmospheric and splendidly elliptical, featuring an assortment of psychotropic houses, time-traveling assassins, and cities without clocks. Over the next fifty years, his fierce imaginative energy propelled him to explore new topics, including the dehumanization of technology, the brutality of the corporation, and nuclear Armageddon. Depicting the human soul as "being

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THE COMPLETE STORIES OF J.G. BALLARD

Works by J.G. Ballard

The Drowned World
The Voices of Time
The Terminal Beach
The Drought
The Crystal World
The Day of Forever
The Venus Hunters
The Disaster Area
The Atrocity Exhibition
Vermilion Sands
Crash
Concrete Island
High-Rise
Low-Flying Aircraft
The Unlimited Dream Company
Hello America
Myths of the Near Future
Empire of the Sun
Running Wild
The Day of Creation
War Fever
The Kindness of Women
Rushing to Paradise
A User's Guide to the Millennium (nf)
Cocaine Nights
Super-Cannes
The Complete Stories of J.G. Ballard

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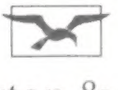
THE COMPLETE STORIES OF J.G. BALLARD



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INTRODUCTION

Martin Amis

I first came across Jim Ballard when I was a teenager in the 1960s. My father, Kingsley Amis, championed his work, calling him 'the brightest star in British postwar SF' (all purists call science fiction SF, and have the greatest contempt for 'sci fi'); and Jim was a frequent visitor to the house. He was, I thought, a charismatically handsome man, with a rich, resonant face and hot, busy eyes; and he talked in the cadences of extreme sarcasm, using abnormally heavy stresses (he wasn't being sarcastic; he was being gleefully emphatic). In retrospect I see that the friendship between the two did not survive Jim's increasing interest in experimentalism, which Kingsley always anathematised as 'buggering about with the reader'. But I always felt a strong surge of warmth whenever I saw Jim later on; funnily enough, he was an exceptionally lovable man, despite the ferocity of his imagination.

His imagination was formed by his wartime experience in Shanghai, where he was interned by the Japanese. He was thirteen, and took to camp life as he would to 'a huge slum family'. But it wasn't just the camp that formed him – it was the startlingly low value attached to human life, something he witnessed throughout his childhood. He once saw a rickshaw coolie being beaten to death ten feet from where he stood, and each morning as he was driven to school in an American limousine he saw 'a dead body every two hundred yards'. Then came the Japanese (and the feral antagonism that would give rise, most notably, to the rape of Nanking). 'People brought up in the social democracies of Western Europe,' he once told me, during a day-long interview in 1984, 'have no idea of this kind of savagery. No they don't, actually, and it's a good thing that they don't.'

It is interesting that his two most famous novels were both filmed by famous (and interesting) directors: *Empire of the Sun* by Steven Spielberg (an essentially optimistic artist who is nonetheless drawn to dark historical themes) and *Crash* by David Cronenberg (a much darker artist himself, and one who specialises in filming unfilmably rebarbative novels). *Empire*, as Ballard always called it, is the novel about Shanghai; *Crash* is animated by an obsession with the sexuality of the road accident – and is much the more typical. One is reminded that 'obsession' derives from the Latin *obsidere*, which means 'to lay siege to'. Ballard was beleaguered by obsession. In his work, mood and landscape are indivisible. He had very little curiosity about human beings in the conventional sense, i. e., as individuals (and a revealingly weak

ear for dialogue); he was utterly visual, and his mind, like his settings, was in his own phrase 'lunar and abstract'.

Waywardly but intelligibly, *Empire of the Sun* – his greatest success – came as a kind of backhander to Ballard's most faithful admirers. The novel, which is utterly and unwontedly realistic, seemed a kind of betrayal of the Ballard mystique. The cultists felt that *Empire* showed how the author's imagination had been warped into such an outlandish shape; it was a naturalistic explanation of how he got that way. For the cultists (again, not very logically), it was as if the witchdoctor had drily revealed the secret of his charms.

Ballard began as a hardcore SF writer (his early stuff was published in such magazines as *Amazing Stories*, *Science Fantasy*, *New Worlds*, and the like). But the genre couldn't hold him. There followed four novels of poeticised apocalypse – *The Wind from Nowhere* (1961), *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Drought* (1964), and *The Crystal World* (1966) – where, with great relish, the planet is destroyed, respectively, by mega-hurricane, by flood, by heat, and by mineralisation. Then came his brutalist period, beginning in 1970 with *The Atrocity Exhibition*. Two chapter headings from that book will give you a fair intimation of the new emphasis: 'The Facelift of Princess Margaret' and 'Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan'.

Brutalism elided into what might be called the years of mortar and steel, with *Crash* (1973), *Concrete Island* (1974), and *High-Rise* (1975), and then levelled out into a general preoccupation best evoked by another title – 'Myths of the Near Future'. The near future went on being his personal 'theme park' – a favourite phrase – until his death (despite a notable divagation into the past, with the beautiful and moving memoir *Miracles of Life*, published in 2008). The last novels, which include *Cocaine Nights* (1996) and *Super-Cannes* (2000), concerned themselves with the latent atavisms of corporate and ultra-privileged enclaves: the psychoses of the gated community.

Ballard brought to all these phases his kabbalistic skill in extrapolating from the present. This was his abiding question: what effect does the modern setting have on our psyches – the motion sculpture of the highways, the airport architecture, the culture of the shopping mall, the pervasiveness of pornography, and our dependence on ungrasped technologies? His tentative answer was perversity, which takes various forms, all of them (Ballard being Ballard) pathologically extreme. When he distanced himself from generic SF, he said that he was rejecting outer space in favour of 'inner space'. Inner space was always his beat.

As a man, Ballard was a great exemplar of the Flaubertian principle: writers should be orderly and predictable in their lives, so that they can be ferocious and sinister in their work. He lived in the dormitory precinct of Shepperton, in a semi-detached house which might as well have been called 'HisandHers' or 'Dunroamin', and there was the standard tomato-red Ford Escort in its slot in the little front garden. When I visited him in 1984, he said, 'All these French

Crash-freaks used to come out here to see me, expecting a miasma of child-molestation and drug abuse.' What they found was a robustly rounded and amazingly cheerful suburbanite.

I arrived at eleven in the morning, and his first words were 'Whisky! Gin! Vodka!' It was his only eccentricity of the day (and we both settled for coffee). In 1964 his wife Mary died, suddenly and dismayingly, on a family holiday, and Ballard at once resolved to raise the three children himself. To begin with he could only get through the day by drinking a large scotch every hour, starting at nine in the morning. It took him quite a while to push this back to six in the evening. I asked him, 'Was that difficult?' And he said, 'Difficult? It was like the Battle of Stalingrad.' But push it back he did, and everything suggests that he was a tolerant, pragmatic, and impeccably adoring father.

The last time I saw Jim, three or four years ago, was when my wife and I (and Will Self and his wife Deborah Orr) had dinner with him and his partner of forty years, Claire Walsh. He revealed in the restaurant that he had 'about two years to live. They tell me about two years.' This was said with instinctive courage, but with all the melancholy to be expected from a man who loved the miracle of life so ardently.

The short stories collected here span an entire creative life – all the way, from the first articulated words to the last. How to characterise them? Well, if H.H. Munro ('Saki') and Jorge Luis Borges had met, in Shanghai in 1930, and fallen in love, then J.G. Ballard would have been their child. He is an expert at the Saki-esque twist, the sting in the tail; and, like Borges, he addresses his fantastic figments with glazed and invincible conviction.

Ballard's evolution or trajectory, as described above, is detectable here in fragmentary form. In the early stories we see him pushing hard against the boundaries of conventional SF. In this genre, the most often-visited future is the dystopia of overpopulation. Watch what Ballard does with it:

> Noon talk on Millionth Street . . .
>
> 'Take a westbound express to 495th Avenue, cross over to a Redline elevator and go up a thousand levels to Plaza Terminal. Carry on south from there and you'll find it between 568th Avenue and 422nd Street.'

In his (later-disowned) first novel, *The Wind from Nowhere*, Ballard conjures a fast-moving and city-swallowing lateral avalanche of concrete and steel. In 'The Concentration City' we are shown a planetwide highrise – and a world without sea and without sky.

He never abandoned the science-fictional tour de force, as an option for certain global or cosmic ideas; but the focus soon moves toward the inner space of the mind. See 'Manhole 69', in which various volunteers are scientifically conditioned to do without sleep (the outcome is brilliantly terrifying); see 'The

Sudden Afternoon', in which a man finds that his memory – and then his entire identity – is being invaded by a murderer. These are literalistic versions of the broader tendency: the psychic distortions and intrusions that await us in the 'near-after'.

And Ballard's mind? It continually circles back to the experiences recounted in *Empire* (and in *Miracles of Life*). On the one hand, the drained swimming pools, the abandoned villas, and the wraithlike wanderers in a landscape from which all recognisable human activity has absented itself; and, on the other, the squalor, the hellish proximities, and the vigilant cruelty that derives from the camp. All these fables are written in a prose that veers from the higher-utilitarian to something ecstatic, melodious, and creamily precise: a style all his own.

J.G. Ballard will quite possibly be remembered as the most original English writer of the last century. It is a solecism to talk about degrees of uniqueness (either you are or you aren't), but Ballard was somehow uniquely unique. He used to like saying that writers were 'one-man teams' (and needed the 'support' of their readers). But he was also a one-man genre. He was impregnably *sui generis*. No one is or was remotely like him.

—London, May 2009

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

Short stories are the loose change in the treasury of fiction, easily ignored beside the wealth of novels available, an over-valued currency that often turns out to be counterfeit. At its best, in Borges, Ray Bradbury and Edgar Allan Poe, the short story is coined from precious metal, a glint of gold that will glow for ever in the deep purse of your imagination.

Short stories have always been important to me. I like their snapshot quality, their ability to focus intensely on a single subject. They're also a useful way of trying out the ideas later developed at novel length. Almost all my novels were first hinted at in short stories, and readers of *The Crystal World*, *Crash* and *Empire of the Sun* will find their seeds germinating somewhere in this collection.

When I started writing, fifty years ago, short stories were immensely popular with readers, and some newspapers printed a new short story every day. Sadly, I think that people at present have lost the knack of reading short stories, a response perhaps to the baggy and long-winded narratives of television serials. Young writers, myself included, have always seen their first novels as a kind of virility test, but so many novels published today would have been better if they had been recast as short stories. Curiously, there are many perfect short stories, but no perfect novels.

The short story still survives, especially in science fiction, which makes the most of its closeness to the folk tale and the parable. Many of the stories in this collection were first published in science fiction magazines, though readers at the time loudly complained that they weren't science fiction at all.

But I was interested in the real future that I could see approaching, and less in the invented future that science fiction preferred. The future, needless to say, is a dangerous area to enter, heavily mined and with a tendency to turn and bite your ankles as you stride forward. A correspondent recently pointed out to me that the poetry-writing computers in *Vermilion Sands* are powered by valves. And why don't all those sleek people living in the future have PCs and pagers?

I could only reply that *Vermilion Sands* isn't set in the future at all, but in a kind of visionary present – a description that fits the stories in this book and almost everything else I have written. But oh for a steam-powered computer and a wind-driven television set. Now, there's an idea for a short story . . .

J.G. Ballard, 2001

PRIMA BELLADONNA

I first met Jane Ciracylides during the Recess, that world slump of boredom, lethargy and high summer which carried us all so blissfully through ten unforgettable years, and I suppose that may have had a lot to do with what went on between us. Certainly I can't believe I could make myself as ridiculous now, but then again, it might have been just Jane herself.

Whatever else they said about her, everyone had to agree she was a beautiful girl, even if her genetic background was a little mixed. The gossips at Vermilion Sands soon decided there was a good deal of mutant in her, because she had a rich patina-golden skin and what looked like insects for eyes, but that didn't bother either myself or any of my friends, one or two of whom, like Tony Miles and Harry Devine, have never since been quite the same to their wives.

We spent most of our time in those days on the balcony of my apartment off Beach Drive, drinking beer – we always kept a useful supply stacked in the refrigerator of my music shop on the street level – yarning in a desultory way and playing i-Go, a sort of decelerated chess which was popular then. None of the others ever did any work; Harry was an architect and Tony Miles sometimes sold a few ceramics to the tourists, but I usually put a couple of hours in at the shop each morning, getting off the foreign orders and turning the beer.

One particularly hot lazy day I'd just finished wrapping up a delicate soprano mimosa wanted by the Hamburg Oratorio Society when Harry phoned down from the balcony.

'Parker's Choro-Flora?' he said. 'You're guilty of overproduction. Come up here. Tony and I have something beautiful to show you.'

When I went up I found them grinning happily like two dogs who had just discovered an interesting tree.

'Well?' I asked. 'Where is it?'

Tony tilted his head slightly. 'Over there.'

I looked up and down the street, and across the face of the apartment house opposite.

'Careful,' he warned me. 'Don't gape at her.'

I slid into one of the wicker chairs and craned my head round cautiously.

'Fourth floor,' Harry elaborated slowly, out of the side of his mouth. 'One left from the balcony opposite. Happy now?'

'Dreaming,' I told him, taking a long slow focus on her. 'I wonder what else she can do?'

Harry and Tony sighed thankfully. 'Well?' Tony asked.

'She's out of my league,' I said. 'But you two shouldn't have any trouble. Go over and tell her how much she needs you.'

Harry groaned. 'Don't you realize, this one is poetic, emergent, something straight out of the primal apocalyptic sea. She's probably divine.'

The woman was strolling around the lounge, rearranging the furniture, wearing almost nothing except a large metallic hat. Even in shadow the sinuous lines of her thighs and shoulders gleamed gold and burning. She was a walking galaxy of light. Vermilion Sands had never seen anything like her.

'The approach has got to be equivocal,' Harry continued, gazing into his beer. 'Shy, almost mystical. Nothing urgent or grabbing.'

The woman stooped down to unpack a suitcase and the metal vanes of her hat fluttered over her face. She saw us staring at her, looked around for a moment and lowered the blinds.

We sat back and looked thoughtfully at each other, like three triumvirs deciding how to divide an empire, not saying too much, and one eye watching for any chance of a double-deal.

Five minutes later the singing started.

At first I thought it was one of the azalea trios in trouble with an alkaline pH, but the frequencies were too high. They were almost out of the audible range, a thin tremolo quaver which came out of nowhere and rose up the back of the skull.

Harry and Tony frowned at me.

'Your livestock's unhappy about something,' Tony told me. 'Can you quieten it down?'

'It's not the plants,' I told him. 'Can't be.'

The sound mounted in intensity, scraping the edges off my occipital bones. I was about to go down to the shop when Harry and Tony leapt out of their chairs and dived back against the wall.

'Steve, look out!' Tony yelled at me. He pointed wildly at the table I was leaning on, picked up a chair and smashed it down on the glass top.

I stood up and brushed the fragments out of my hair.

'What the hell's the matter?'

Tony was looking down at the tangle of wickerwork tied round the metal struts of the table. Harry came forward and took my arm gingerly.

'That was close. You all right?'

'It's gone,' Tony said flatly. He looked carefully over the balcony floor and down over the rail into the street.

'What was it?' I asked.

Harry peered at me closely. 'Didn't you see it? It was about three inches from you. Emperor scorpion, big as a lobster.' He sat down weakly on a beer crate. 'Must have been a sonic one. The noise has gone now.'

After they'd left I cleared up the mess and had a quiet beer to myself. I could have sworn nothing had got on to the table.

On the balcony opposite, wearing a gown of ionized fibre, the golden woman was watching me.

I found out who she was the next morning. Tony and Harry were down at the beach with their wives, probably enlarging on the scorpion, and I was in the shop tuning up a Khan-Arachnid orchid with the UV lamp. It was a difficult bloom, with a normal full range of twenty-four octaves, but unless it got a lot of exercise it tended to relapse into neurotic minor-key transpositions which were the devil to break. And as the senior bloom in the shop it naturally affected all the others. Invariably when I opened the shop in the mornings, it sounded like a madhouse, but as soon as I'd fed the Arachnid and straightened out one or two pH gradients the rest promptly took their cues from it and dimmed down quietly in their control tanks, two-time, three-four, the multi-tones, all in perfect harmony.

There were only about a dozen true Arachnids in captivity; most of the others were either mutes or grafts from dicot stems, and I was lucky to have mine at all. I'd bought the place five years earlier from an old half-deaf man called Sayers, and the day before he left he moved a lot of rogue stock out to the garbage disposal scoop behind the apartment block. Reclaiming some of the tanks, I'd come across the Arachnid, thriving on a diet of algae and perished rubber tubing.

Why Sayers had wanted to throw it away I had never discovered. Before he came to Vermilion Sands he'd been a curator at the Kew Conservatoire where the first choro-flora had been bred, and had worked under the Director, Dr Mandel. As a young botanist of twenty-five Mandel had discovered the prime Arachnid in the Guiana forest. The orchid took its name from the Khan-Arachnid spider which pollinated the flower, simultaneously laying its own eggs in the fleshy ovule, guided, or as Mandel always insisted, actually mesmerized to it by the vibrations which the orchid's calyx emitted at pollination time. The first Arachnid orchids beamed out only a few random frequencies, but by cross-breeding and maintaining them artificially at the pollination stage Mandel had produced a strain that spanned a maximum of twenty-four octaves.

Not that he had ever been able to hear them. At the climax of his life's work Mandel, like Beethoven, was stone deaf, but apparently by merely looking at a blossom he could listen to its music. Strangely though, after he went deaf he never looked at an Arachnid.

That morning I could almost understand why. The orchid was in a vicious mood. First it refused to feed, and I had to coax it along in a fluoraldehyde flush, and then it started going ultra-sonic, which meant complaints from all the dog owners in the area. Finally it tried to fracture the tank by resonating.

The whole place was in uproar, and I was almost resigned to shutting them down and waking them all by hand individually – a backbreaking

job with eighty tanks in the shop – when everything suddenly died away to a murmur.

I looked round and saw the golden-skinned woman walk in.

'Good morning,' I said. 'They must like you.'

She laughed pleasantly. 'Hello. Weren't they behaving?'

Under the black beach robe her skin was a softer, more mellow gold, and it was her eyes that held me. I could just see them under the wide-brimmed hat. Insect legs wavered delicately round two points of purple light.

She walked over to a bank of mixed ferns and stood looking at them. The ferns reached out towards her and trebled eagerly in their liquid fluted voices.

'Aren't they sweet?' she said, stroking the fronds gently. 'They need so much affection.'

Her voice was low in the register, a breath of cool sand pouring, with a lilt that gave it music.

'I've just come to Vermilion Sands,' she said, 'and my apartment seems awfully quiet. Perhaps if I had a flower, one would be enough, I shouldn't feel so lonely.'

I couldn't take my eyes off her.

'Yes,' I agreed, brisk and businesslike. 'What about something colourful? This Sumatra Samphire, say? It's a pedigree mezzo-soprano from the same follicle as the Bayreuth Festival Prima Belladonna.'

'No,' she said. 'It looks rather cruel.'

'Or this Louisiana Lute Lily? If you thin out its SO_2 it'll play some beautiful madrigals. I'll show you how to do it.'

She wasn't listening to me. Slowly, her hands raised in front of her breasts so that she almost seemed to be praying, she moved towards the display counter on which the Arachnid stood.

'How beautiful it is,' she said, gazing at the rich yellow and purple leaves hanging from the scarlet-ribbed vibrocalyx.

I followed her across the floor and switched on the Arachnid's audio so that she could hear it. Immediately the plant came to life. The leaves stiffened and filled with colour and the calyx inflated, its ribs sprung tautly. A few sharp disconnected notes spat out.

'Beautiful, but evil,' I said.

'Evil?' she repeated. 'No, proud.' She stepped closer to the orchid and looked down into its malevolent head. The Arachnid quivered and the spines on its stem arched and flexed menacingly.

'Careful,' I warned her. 'It's sensitive to the faintest respiratory sounds.'

'Quiet,' she said, waving me back. 'I think it wants to sing.'

'Those are only key fragments,' I told her. 'It doesn't perform. I use it as a frequency –'

'Listen!' She held my arm and squeezed it tightly.

A low, rhythmic fusion of melody had been coming from the plants around the shop, and mounting above them I heard a single stronger

voice calling out, at first a thin high-pitched reed of sound that began to pulse and deepen and finally swelled into full baritone, raising the other plants in chorus about itself.

I had never heard the Arachnid sing before. I was listening to it open-eared when I felt a glow of heat burn against my arm. I turned and saw the woman staring intently at the plant, her skin aflame, the insects in her eyes writhing insanely. The Arachnid stretched out towards her, calyx erect, leaves like blood-red sabres.

I stepped round her quickly and switched off the argon feed. The Arachnid sank to a whimper, and around us there was a nightmarish babel of broken notes and voices toppling from high C's and L's into discord. A faint whispering of leaves moved over the silence.

The woman gripped the edge of the tank and gathered herself. Her skin dimmed and the insects in her eyes slowed to a delicate wavering.

'Why did you turn it off?' she asked heavily.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'But I've got ten thousand dollars' worth of stock here and that sort of twelve-tone emotional storm can blow a lot of valves. Most of these plants aren't equipped for grand opera.'

She watched the Arachnid as the gas drained out of its calyx. One by one its leaves buckled and lost their colour.

'How much is it?' she asked me, opening her bag.

'It's not for sale,' I said. 'Frankly I've no idea how it picked up those bars –'

'Will a thousand dollars be enough?' she asked, her eyes fixed on me steadily.

'I can't,' I told her. 'I'd never be able to tune the others without it. Anyway,' I added, trying to smile, 'that Arachnid would be dead in ten minutes if you took it out of its vivarium. All these cylinders and leads would look a little odd inside your lounge.'

'Yes, of course,' she agreed, suddenly smiling back at me. 'I was stupid.' She gave the orchid a last backward glance and strolled away across the floor to the long Tchaikovsky section popular with the tourists.

'*Pathétique*,' she read off a label at random. 'I'll take this.'

I wrapped up the scabia and slipped the instructional booklet into the crate, keeping my eye on her all the time.

'Don't look so alarmed,' she said with amusement. 'I've never heard anything like that before.'

I wasn't alarmed. It was that thirty years at Vermilion Sands had narrowed my horizons.

'How long are you staying at Vermilion Sands?' I asked her.

'I open at the Casino tonight,' she said. She told me her name was Jane Ciracylides and that she was a speciality singer.

'Why don't you look in?' she asked, her eyes fluttering mischievously. 'I come on at eleven. You may find it interesting.'

I did. The next morning Vermilion Sands hummed. Jane created a

sensation. After her performance three hundred people swore they'd seen everything from a choir of angels taking the vocal in the music of the spheres to Alexander's Ragtime Band. As for myself, perhaps I'd listened to too many flowers, but at least I knew where the scorpion on the balcony had come from.

Tony Miles had heard Sophie Tucker singing the 'St Louis Blues', and Harry, the elder Bach conducting the B Minor Mass.

They came round to the shop and argued over their respective performances while I wrestled with the flowers.

'Amazing,' Tony exclaimed. 'How does she do it? Tell me.'

'The Heidelberg score,' Harry ecstased. 'Sublime, absolute.' He looked irritably at the flowers. 'Can't you keep these things quiet? They're making one hell of a row.'

They were, and I had a shrewd idea why. The Arachnid was completely out of control, and by the time I'd clamped it down in a weak saline it had blown out over three hundred dollars' worth of shrubs.

'The performance at the Casino last night was nothing on the one she gave here yesterday,' I told them. '*The Ring of the Niebelungs* played by Stan Kenton. That Arachnid went insane. I'm sure it wanted to kill her.'

Harry watched the plant convulsing its leaves in rigid spasmic movements.

'If you ask me it's in an advanced state of rut. Why should it want to kill her?'

'Her voice must have overtones that irritate its calyx. None of the other plants minded. They cooed like turtle doves when she touched them.'

Tony shivered happily.

Light dazzled in the street outside.

I handed Tony the broom. 'Here, lover, brace yourself on that. Miss Ciracylides is dying to meet you.'

Jane came into the shop, wearing a flame yellow cocktail skirt and another of her hats.

I introduced her to Harry and Tony.

'The flowers seem very quiet this morning,' she said. 'What's the matter with them?'

'I'm cleaning out the tanks,' I told her. 'By the way, we all want to congratulate you on last night. How does it feel to be able to name your fiftieth city?'

She smiled shyly and sauntered away round the shop. As I knew she would, she stopped by the Arachnid and levelled her eyes at it.

I wanted to see what she'd say, but Harry and Tony were all around her, and soon got her up to my apartment, where they had a hilarious morning playing the fool and raiding my scotch.

'What about coming out with us after the show tonight?' Tony asked her. 'We can go dancing at the Flamingo.'

'But you're both married,' Jane protested. 'Aren't you worried about your reputations?'

'Oh, we'll bring the girls,' Harry said airily. 'And Steve here can come along and hold your coat.'

We played i-Go together. Jane said she'd never played the game before, but she had no difficulty picking up the rules, and when she started sweeping the board with us I knew she was cheating. Admittedly it isn't every day that you get a chance to play i-Go with a golden-skinned woman with insects for eyes, but never the less I was annoyed. Harry and Tony, of course, didn't mind.

'She's charming,' Harry said, after she'd left. 'Who cares? It's a stupid game anyway.'

'I care,' I said. 'She cheats.'

The next three or four days at the shop were an audio-vegetative armageddon. Jane came in every morning to look at the Arachnid, and her presence was more than the flower could bear. Unfortunately I couldn't starve the plants below their thresholds. They needed exercise and they had to have the Arachnid to lead them. But instead of running through its harmonic scales the orchid only screeched and whined. It wasn't the noise, which only a couple of dozen people complained about, but the damage being done to their vibratory chords that worried me. Those in the seventeenth century catalogues stood up well to the strain, and the moderns were immune, but the Romantics burst their calyxes by the score. By the third day after Jane's arrival I'd lost two hundred dollars' worth of Beethoven and more Mendelssohn and Schubert than I could bear to think about.

Jane seemed oblivious to the trouble she was causing me.

'What's wrong with them all?' she asked, surveying the chaos of gas cylinders and drip feeds spread across the floor.

'I don't think they like you,' I told her. 'At least the Arachnid doesn't. Your voice may move men to strange and wonderful visions, but it throws that orchid into acute melancholia.'

'Nonsense,' she said, laughing at me. 'Give it to me and I'll show you how to look after it.'

'Are Tony and Harry keeping you happy?' I asked her. I was annoyed that I couldn't go down to the beach with them and instead had to spend my time draining tanks and titrating up norm solutions, none of which ever worked.

'They're very amusing,' she said. 'We play i-Go and I sing for them. But I wish you could come out more often.'

After another two weeks I had to give up. I decided to close the plants down until Jane had left Vermilion Sands. I knew it would take me three months to rescore the stock, but I had no alternative.

The next day I received a large order for mixed coloratura herbaceous from the Santiago Garden Choir. They wanted delivery in three weeks.

'I'm sorry,' Jane said, when she heard I wouldn't be able to fill the order. 'You must wish that I'd never come to Vermilion Sands.'

She stared thoughtfully into one of the darkened tanks.

'Couldn't I score them for you?' she suggested.

'No thanks,' I said, laughing. 'I've had enough of that already.'

'Don't be silly, of course I could.'

I shook my head.

Tony and Harry told me I was crazy.

'Her voice has a wide enough range,' Tony said. 'You admit it yourself.'

'What have you got against her?' Harry asked. 'That she cheats at i-Go?'

'It's nothing to do with that,' I said. 'And her voice has a wider range than you think.'

We played i-Go at Jane's apartment. Jane won ten dollars from each of us.

'I am lucky,' she said, very pleased with herself. 'I never seem to lose.' She counted up the bills and put them away carefully in her bag, her golden skin glowing.

Then Santiago sent me a repeat query.

I found Jane down among the cafés, holding off a siege of admirers.

'Have you given in yet?' she asked me, smiling at the young men.

'I don't know what you're doing to me,' I said, 'but anything is worth trying.'

Back at the shop I raised a bank of perennials past their thresholds. Jane helped me attach the gas and fluid lines.

'We'll try these first,' I said. 'Frequencies 543–785. Here's the score.'

Jane took off her hat and began to ascend the scale, her voice clear and pure. At first the Columbine hesitated and Jane went down again and drew them along with her. They went up a couple of octaves together and then the plants stumbled and went off at a tangent of stepped chords.

'Try K sharp,' I said. I fed a little chlorous acid into the tank and the Columbine followed her up eagerly, the infra-calyxes warbling delicate variations on the treble clef.

'Perfect,' I said.

It took us only four hours to fill the order.

'You're better than the Arachnid,' I congratulated her. 'How would you like a job? I'll fit you out with a large cool tank and all the chlorine you can breathe.'

'Careful,' she told me. 'I may say yes. Why don't we rescore a few more of them while we're about it?'

'You're tired,' I said. 'Let's go and have a drink.'

'Let me try the Arachnid,' she suggested. 'That would be more of a challenge.'

Her eyes never left the flower. I wondered what they'd do if I left them together. Try to sing each other to death?

'No,' I said. 'Tomorrow perhaps.'

We sat on the balcony together, glasses at our elbows, and talked the afternoon away.

She told me little about herself, but I gathered that her father had been a mining engineer in Peru and her mother a dancer at a Lima vu-tavern. They'd wandered from deposit to deposit, the father digging his concessions, the mother signing on at the nearest bordello to pay the rent.

'She only sang, of course,' Jane added. 'Until my father came.' She blew bubbles into her glass. 'So you think I give them what they want at the Casino. By the way, what do you see?'

'I'm afraid I'm your one failure,' I said. 'Nothing. Except you.'

She dropped her eyes. 'That sometimes happens,' she said. 'I'm glad this time.'

A million suns pounded inside me. Until then I'd been reserving judgment on myself.

Harry and Tony were polite, if disappointed.

'I can't believe it,' Harry said sadly. 'I won't. How did you do it?'

'That mystical left-handed approach, of course,' I told him. 'All ancient seas and dark wells.'

'What's she like?' Tony asked eagerly. 'I mean, does she burn or just tingle?'

Jane sang at the Casino every night from eleven to three, but apart from that I suppose we were always together. Sometimes in the late afternoons we'd drive out along the beach to the Scented Desert and sit alone by one of the pools, watching the sun fall away behind the reefs and hills, lulling ourselves on the rose-sick air. When the wind began to blow cool across the sand we'd slip down into the water, bathe ourselves and drive back to town, filling the streets and café terraces with jasmine and musk-rose and helianthemum.

On other evenings we'd go down to one of the quiet bars at Lagoon West, and have supper out on the flats, and Jane would tease the waiters and sing honeybirds and angelcakes to the children who came in across the sand to watch her.

I realize now that I must have achieved a certain notoriety along the beach, but I didn't mind giving the old women – and beside Jane they all seemed to be old women – something to talk about. During the Recess no one cared very much about anything, and for that reason I never questioned myself too closely over my affair with Jane Ciracylides. As I sat on the balcony with her looking out over the cool early evenings or felt her body glowing beside me in the darkness I allowed myself few anxieties.

Absurdly, the only disagreement I ever had with her was over her cheating.

I remember that I once taxed her with it.

'Do you know you've taken over five hundred dollars from me, Jane? You're still doing it. Even now!'

She laughed impishly. 'Do I cheat? I'll let you win one day.'

'But why do you?' I insisted.

'It's more fun to cheat,' she said. 'Otherwise it's so boring.'

'Where will you go when you leave Vermilion Sands?' I asked her.

She looked at me in surprise. 'Why do you say that? I don't think I shall ever leave.'

'Don't tease me, Jane. You're a child of another world than this.'

'My father came from Peru,' she reminded me.

'But you didn't get your voice from him,' I said. 'I wish I could have heard your mother sing. Had she a better voice than yours, Jane?'

'She thought so. My father couldn't stand either of us.'

That was the evening I last saw Jane. We'd changed, and in the half an hour before she left for the Casino we sat on the balcony and I listened to her voice, like a spectral fountain, pour its luminous notes into the air. The music remained with me even after she'd gone, hanging faintly in the darkness around her chair.

I felt curiously sleepy, almost sick on the air she'd left behind, and at 11.30, when I knew she'd be appearing on stage at the Casino, I went out for a walk along the beach.

As I left the elevator I heard music coming from the shop.

At first I thought I'd left one of the audio switches on, but I knew the voice only too well.

The windows of the shop had been shuttered, so I got in through the passage which led from the garage courtyard round at the back of the apartment house.

The lights had been turned out, but a brilliant glow filled the shop, throwing a golden fire on to the tanks along the counters. Across the ceiling liquid colours danced in reflection.

The music I had heard before, but only in overture.

The Arachnid had grown to three times its size. It towered nine feet high out of the shattered lid of the control tank, leaves tumid and inflamed, its calyx as large as a bucket, raging insanely.

Arched forwards into it, her head thrown back, was Jane.

I ran over to her, my eyes filling with light, and grabbed her arm, trying to pull her away from it.

'Jane!' I shouted over the noise. 'Get down!'

She flung my hand away. In her eyes, fleetingly, was a look of shame.

While I was sitting on the stairs in the entrance Tony and Harry drove up.

'Where's Jane?' Harry asked. 'Has anything happened to her? We were down at the Casino.' They both turned towards the music. 'What the hell's going on?'

Tony peered at me suspiciously. 'Steve, anything wrong?'

Harry dropped the bouquet he was carrying and started towards the rear entrance.

'Harry!' I shouted after him. 'Get back!'

Tony held my shoulder. 'Is Jane in there?'

I caught them as they opened the door into the shop.

'Good God!' Harry yelled. 'Let go of me, you fool!' He struggled to get away from me. 'Steve, it's trying to kill her!'

I jammed the door shut and held them back.

I never saw Jane again. The three of us waited in my apartment. When the music died away we went down and found the shop in darkness. The Arachnid had shrunk to its normal size.

The next day it died.

Where Jane went to I don't know. Not long afterwards the Recess ended, and the big government schemes came along and started up all the clocks and kept us too busy working off the lost time to worry about a few bruised petals. Harry told me that Jane had been seen on her way through Red Beach, and I heard recently that someone very like her was doing the nightclubs this side out of Pernambuco.

So if any of you around here keep a choro-florist's, and have a Khan-Arachnid orchid, look out for a golden-skinned woman with insects for eyes. Perhaps she'll play i-Go with you, and I'm sorry to have to say it, but she'll always cheat.

1956

ESCAPEMENT

Neither of us was watching the play too closely when I first noticed the slip. I was stretched back in front of the fire with the crossword, braising gently and toying with 17 down ('told by antique clocks? 5, 5.') while Helen was hemming an old petticoat, looking up only when the third lead, a heavy-chinned youth with a 42-inch neck and a base-surge voice, heaved manfully downscreen. The play was 'My Sons, My Sons', one of those Thursday night melodramas Channel 2 put out through the winter months, and had been running for about an hour; we'd reached that ebb somewhere round Act 3 Scene 3 just after the old farmer learns that his sons no longer respect him. The whole play must have been recorded on film, and it sounded extremely funny to switch from the old man's broken mutterings back to the showdown sequence fifteen minutes earlier when the eldest son starts drumming his chest and dragging in the high symbols. Somewhere an engineer was out of a job.

'They've got their reels crossed,' I told Helen. 'This is where we came in.'

'Is it?' she said, looking up. 'I wasn't watching. Tap the set.'

'Just wait and see. In a moment everyone in the studio will start apologizing.'

Helen peered at the screen. 'I don't think we've seen this,' she said. 'I'm sure we haven't. Quiet.'

I shrugged and went back to 17 down, thinking vaguely about sand dials and water clocks. The scene dragged on; the old man stood his ground, ranted over his turnips and thundered desperately for Ma. The studio must have decided to run it straight through again and pretend no one had noticed. Even so they'd be fifteen minutes behind their schedule.

Ten minutes later it happened again.

I sat up. 'That's funny,' I said slowly. 'Haven't they spotted it yet? They can't all be asleep.'

'What's the matter?' Helen asked, looking up from her needle basket. 'Is something wrong with the set?'

'I thought you were watching. I told you we'd seen this before. Now they're playing it back for the third time.'

'They're not,' Helen insisted. 'I'm sure they aren't. You must have read the book.'

'Heaven forbid.' I watched the set closely. Any minute now an announcer spitting on a sandwich would splutter red-faced to the screen. I'm not

one of those people who reach for their phones every time someone mispronounces meteorology, but this time I knew there'd be thousands who'd feel it their duty to keep the studio exchanges blocked all night. And for any go-ahead comedian on a rival station the lapse was a god-send.

'Do you mind if I change the programme?' I asked Helen. 'See if anything else is on.'

'Don't. This is the most interesting part of the play. You'll spoil it.'

'Darling, you're not even watching. I'll come back to it in a moment, I promise.'

On Channel 5 a panel of three professors and a chorus girl were staring hard at a Roman pot. The question-master, a suave-voiced Oxford don, kept up a lot of crazy patter about scraping the bottom of the barrow. The professors seemed stumped, but the girl looked as if she knew exactly what went into the pot but didn't dare say it.

On 9 there was a lot of studio laughter and someone was giving a sports-car to an enormous woman in a cartwheel hat. The woman nervously ducked her head away from the camera and stared glumly at the car. The compère opened the door for her and I was wondering whether she'd try to get into it when Helen cut in:

'Harry, don't be mean. You're just playing.'

I turned back to the play on Channel 2. The same scene was on, nearing the end of its run.

'Now watch it,' I told Helen. She usually managed to catch on the third time round. 'Put that sewing away, it's getting on my nerves. God, I know this off by heart.'

'Sh!' Helen told me. 'Can't you stop talking?'

I lit a cigarette and lay back in the sofa, waiting. The apologies, to say the least, would have to be magniloquent. Two ghost runs at £100 a minute totted up to a tidy heap of doubloons.

The scene drew to a close, the old man stared heavily at his boots, the dusk drew down and –

We were back where we started from.

'Fantastic!' I said, standing up and turning some snow off the screen. 'It's incredible.'

'I didn't know you enjoyed this sort of play,' Helen said calmly. 'You never used to.' She glanced over at the screen and then went back to her petticoat.

I watched her warily. A million years earlier I'd probably have run howling out of the cave and flung myself thankfully under the nearest dinosaur. Nothing in the meanwhile had lessened the dangers hemming in the undaunted husband.

'Darling,' I explained patiently, just keeping the edge out of my voice, 'in case you hadn't noticed they are now playing this same scene through for the fourth time.'

'The fourth time?' Helen said doubtfully. 'Are they repeating it?'

* * *

I was visualizing a studio full of announcers and engineers slumped unconscious over their mikes and valves, while an automatic camera pumped out the same reel. Eerie but unlikely. There were monitor receivers as well as the critics, agents, sponsors, and, unforgivably, the playwright himself weighing every minute and every word in their private currencies. They'd all have a lot to say under tomorrow's headlines.

'Sit down and stop fidgeting,' Helen said. 'Have you lost your bone?'

I felt round the cushions and ran my hand along the carpet below the sofa.

'My cigarette,' I said. 'I must have thrown it into the fire. I don't think I dropped it.'

I turned back to the set and switched on the give-away programme, noting the time, 9.03, so that I could get back to Channel 2 at 9.15. When the explanation came I just had to hear it.

'I thought you were enjoying the play,' Helen said. 'Why've you turned it off?'

I gave her what sometimes passes in our flat for a withering frown and settled back.

The enormous woman was still at it in front of the cameras, working her way up a pyramid of questions on cookery. The audience was subdued but interest mounted. Eventually she answered the jackpot question and the audience roared and thumped their seats like a lot of madmen. The compère led her across the stage to another sports car.

'She'll have a stable of them soon,' I said aside to Helen.

The woman shook hands and awkwardly dipped the brim of her hat, smiling nervously with embarrassment.

The gesture was oddly familiar.

I jumped up and switched to Channel 5. The panel were still staring hard at their pot.

Then I started to realize what was going on.

All three programmes were repeating themselves.

'Helen,' I said over my shoulder. 'Get me a scotch and soda, will you?'

'What *is* the matter? Have you strained your back?'

'Quickly, quickly!' I snapped my fingers.

'Hold on.' She got up and went into the pantry.

I looked at the time. 9.12. Then I returned to the play and kept my eyes glued to the screen. Helen came back and put something down on the end-table.

'There you are. You all right?'

When it switched I thought I was ready for it, but the surprise must have knocked me flat. I found myself lying out on the sofa. The first thing I did was reach round for the drink.

'Where did you put it?' I asked Helen.

'What?'

'The scotch. You brought it in a couple of minutes ago. It was on the table.'

'You've been dreaming,' she said gently. She leant forward and started watching the play.

I went into the pantry and found the bottle. As I filled a tumbler I noticed the clock over the kitchen sink. 9.07. An hour slow, now that I thought about it. But my wristwatch said 9.05, and always ran perfectly. And the clock on the mantelpiece in the lounge also said 9.05.

Before I really started worrying I had to make sure.

Mullvaney, our neighbour in the flat above, opened his door when I knocked.

'Hello, Bartley. Corkscrew?'

'No, no,' I told him. 'What's the right time? Our clocks are going crazy.'

He glanced at his wrist. 'Nearly ten past.'

'Nine or ten?'

He looked at his watch again. 'Nine, should be. What's up?'

'I don't know whether I'm losing my –' I started to say. Then I stopped.

Mullvaney eyed me curiously. Over his shoulder I heard a wave of studio applause, broken by the creamy, unctuous voice of the giveaway compère.

'How long's that programme been on?' I asked him.

'About twenty minutes. Aren't you watching?'

'No,' I said, adding casually, 'Is anything wrong with your set?'

He shook his head. 'Nothing. Why?'

'Mine's chasing its tail. Anyway, thanks.'

'OK,' he said. He watched me go down the stairs and shrugged as he shut his door.

I went into the hall, picked up the phone and dialled.

'Hello, Tom?' Tom Farnold works the desk next to mine at the office. 'Tom, Harry here. What time do you make it?'

'Time the liberals were back.'

'No, seriously.'

'Let's see. Twelve past nine. By the way, did you find those pickles I left for you in the safe?'

'Yeah, thanks. Listen, Tom,' I went on, 'the goddamdest things are happening here. We were watching Diller's play on Channel 2 when –'

'I'm watching it now. Hurry it up.'

'You are? Well, how do you explain this repetition business? And the way the clocks are stuck between 9 and 9.15?'

Tom laughed. 'I don't know,' he said. 'I suggest you go outside and give the house a shake.'

I reached out for the glass I had with me on the hall table, wondering how to explain to –

The next moment I found myself back on the sofa. I was holding the newspaper and looking at 17 down. A part of my mind was thinking about antique clocks.

I pulled myself out of it and glanced across at Helen. She was sitting quietly with her needle basket. The all too familiar play was repeating itself and by the clock on the mantelpiece it was still just after 9.

I went back into the hall and dialled Tom again, trying not to stampede myself. In some way, I hadn't begun to understand how, a section of time was spinning round in a circle, with myself in the centre.

'Tom,' I asked quickly as soon as he picked up the phone. 'Did I call you five minutes ago?'

'Who's that again?'

'Harry here. Harry Bartley. Sorry, Tom.' I paused and rephrased the question, trying to make it sound intelligible. 'Tom, did you phone me up about five minutes ago? We've had a little trouble with the line here.'

'No,' he told me. 'Wasn't me. By the way, did you get those pickles I left in the safe?'

'Thanks a lot,' I said, beginning to panic. 'Are you watching the play, Tom?'

'Yes. I think I'll get back to it. See you.'

I went into the kitchen and had a long close look at myself in the mirror. A crack across it dropped one side of my face three inches below the other, but apart from that I couldn't see anything that added up to a psychosis. My eyes seemed steady, pulse was in the low seventies, no tics or clammy traumatic sweat. Everything around me seemed much too solid and authentic for a dream.

I waited for a minute and then went back to the lounge and sat down. Helen was watching the play.

I leant forward and turned the knob round. The picture dimmed and swayed off.

'Harry, I'm watching that! Don't switch it off.'

I went over to her. 'Poppet,' I said, holding my voice together. 'Listen to me, please. Very carefully. It's important.'

She frowned, put her sewing down and took my hands.

'For some reason, I don't know why, we seem to be in a sort of circular time trap, just going round and round. You're not aware of it, and I can't find anyone else who is either.'

Helen stared at me in amazement. 'Harry,' she started, 'what are you –'

'Helen!' I insisted, gripping her shoulders. 'Listen! For the last two hours a section of time about 15 minutes long has been repeating itself. The clocks are stuck between 9 and 9.15. That play you're watching has –'

'Harry, darling.' She looked at me and smiled helplessly. 'You are silly. Now turn it on again.'

I gave up.

* * *

As I switched the set on I ran through all the other channels just to see if anything had changed.

The panel stared at their pot, the fat woman won her sports car, the old farmer ranted. On Channel 1, the old BBC service which put out a couple of hours on alternate evenings, two newspaper men were interviewing a scientific pundit who appeared on popular educational programmes.

'What effect these dense eruptions of gas will have so far it's impossible to tell. However, there's certainly no cause for any alarm. These billows have mass, and I think we can expect a lot of strange optical effects as the light leaving the sun is deflected by them gravitationally.'

He started playing with a set of coloured celluloid balls running on concentric metal rings, and fiddled with a ripple tank mounted against a mirror on the table.

One of the newsmen asked: 'What about the relationship between light and time? If I remember my relativity they're tied up together pretty closely. Are you sure we won't all need to add another hand to our clocks and watches?'

The pundit smiled. 'I think we'll be able to get along without that. Time is extremely complicated, but I can assure you the clocks won't suddenly start running backwards or sideways.'

I listened to him until Helen began to remonstrate. I switched the play on for her and went off into the hall. The fool didn't know what he was talking about. What I couldn't understand was why I was the only person who realized what was going on. If I could get Tom over I might just be able to convince him.

I picked up the phone and glanced at my watch.

9.13. By the time I got through to Tom the next changeover would be due. Somehow I didn't like the idea of being picked up and flung to the sofa, however painless it might be. I put the phone down and went into the lounge.

The jump-back was smoother than I expected. I wasn't conscious of anything, not even the slightest tremor. A phrase was stuck in my mind: Olden Times.

The newspaper was back on my lap, folded around the crossword. I looked through the clues.

17 down: Told by antique clocks? 5, 5.

I must have solved it subconsciously.

I remembered that I'd intended to phone Tom.

'Hullo, Tom?' I asked when I got through. 'Harry here.'

'Did you get those pickles I left in the safe?'

'Yes, thanks a lot. Tom, could you come round tonight? Sorry to ask you this late, but it's fairly urgent.'

'Yes, of course,' he said. 'What's the trouble?'

'I'll tell you when you get here. As soon as you can?'

'Sure. I'll leave right away. Is Helen all right?'

'Yes, she's fine. Thanks again.'

I went into the dining room and pulled a bottle of gin and a couple of tonics out of the sideboard. He'd need a drink when he heard what I had to say.

Then I realized he'd never make it. From Earls Court it would take him at least half an hour to reach us at Maida Vale and he'd probably get no further than Marble Arch.

I filled my glass out of the virtually bottomless bottle of scotch and tried to work out a plan of action.

The first step was to get hold of someone like myself who retained his awareness of the past switch-backs. Somewhere else there must be others trapped in their little 15-minute cages who were also wondering desperately how to get out. I could start by phoning everyone I knew and then going on at random through the phonebook. But what could we do if we did find each other? In fact there was nothing to do except sit tight and wait for it all to wear off. At least I knew I wasn't looping my loop. Once these billows or whatever they were had burnt themselves out we'd be able to get off the round-about.

Until then I had an unlimited supply of whisky waiting for me in the half-empty bottle standing on the sink, though of course there was one snag: I'd never be able to get drunk.

I was musing round some of the other possibilities available and wondering how to get a permanent record of what was going on when an idea hit me.

I got out the phone-directory and looked up the number of KBC-TV, Channel 9.

A girl at reception answered the phone. After haggling with her for a couple of minutes I persuaded her to put me through to one of the producers.

'Hullo,' I said. 'Is the jackpot question in tonight's programme known to any members of the studio audience?'

'No, of course not.'

'I see. As a matter of interest, do you yourself know it?'

'No,' he said. 'All the questions tonight are known only to our senior programme producer and M. Phillipe Soisson of Savoy Hotels Limited. They're a closely guarded secret.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'If you've got a piece of paper handy I'll give you the jackpot question. "List the complete menu at the Guildhall Coronation Banquet in July 1953."'

There were muttered consultations, and a second voice came through.

'Who's that speaking?'

'Mr H.R. Bartley, 129b Sutton Court Road, N.W. –'

Before I could finish I found myself back in the lounge.

The jump-back had caught me. But instead of being stretched out on the sofa I was standing up, leaning on one elbow against the mantelpiece, looking down at the newspaper.

My eyes were focused clearly on the crossword puzzle, and before I pulled them away and started thinking over my call to the studio I noticed something that nearly dropped me into the grate.

17 down had been filled in.

I picked up the paper and showed it to Helen.

'Did you do this clue? 17 down?'

'No,' she said. 'I never even look at the crossword.'

The clock on the mantelpiece caught my eye, and I forgot about the studio and playing tricks with other people's time.

9.03.

The merry-go-round was closing in. I thought the jump-back had come sooner than I expected. At least two minutes earlier, somewhere around 9.13.

And not only was the repetition interval getting shorter, but as the arc edged inwards on itself it was uncovering the real time stream running below it, the stream in which the other I, unknown to myself here, had solved the clue, stood up, walked over to the mantelpiece and filled in 17 down.

I sat down on the sofa, watching the clock carefully.

For the first time that evening Helen was thumbing over the pages of a magazine. The work basket was tucked away on the bottom shelf of the bookcase.

'Do you want this on any longer?' she asked me. 'It's not very good.'

I turned to the panel game. The three professors and the chorus girl were still playing around with their pot.

On Channel 1 the pundit was sitting at the table with his models.

'. . . alarm. The billows have mass, and I think we can expect a lot of strange optical effects as the light –'

I switched it off.

The next jump-back came at 9.11. Somewhere I'd left the mantelpiece, gone back to the sofa and lit a cigarette.

It was 9.04. Helen had opened the verandah windows and was looking out into the street.

The set was on again so I pulled the plug out at the main. I threw the cigarette into the fire; not having seen myself light it, made it taste like someone else's.

'Harry, like to go out for a stroll?' Helen suggested. 'It'll be rather nice in the park.'

Each successive jump-back gave us a new departure point. If now I bundled her outside and got her down to the end of the road, at the next jump we'd both be back in the lounge again, but probably have decided to drive to the pub instead.

'Harry?'

'What, sorry?'

'Are you asleep, angel? Like to go for a walk? It'll wake you up.'

'All right,' I said. 'Go and get your coat.'

'Will you be warm enough like that?'

She went off into the bedroom

I walked round the lounge and convinced myself that I was awake. The shadows, the solid feel of the chairs, the definition was much too fine for a dream.

It was 9.08. Normally Helen would take ten minutes to put on her coat.

The jump-back came almost immediately.

It was 9.06.

I was still on the sofa and Helen was bending down and picking up her work basket.

This time, at last, the set was off.

'Have you got any money on you?' Helen asked.

I felt in my pocket automatically. 'Yes. How much do you want?'

Helen looked at me. 'Well, what do you usually pay for the drinks? We'll only have a couple.'

'We're going to the pub, are we?'

'Darling, are you all right?' She came over to me. 'You look all strangled. Is that shirt too tight?'

'Helen,' I said, getting up. 'I've got to try to explain something to you. I don't know why it's happening, it's something to do with these billows of gas the sun's releasing.'

Helen was watching me with her mouth open.

'Harry,' she started to say nervously. 'What's the matter?'

'I'm quite all right,' I assured her. 'It's just that everything is happening very rapidly and I don't think there's much time left.'

I kept on glancing at the clock and Helen followed my eyes to it and went over to the mantelpiece. Watching me she moved it round and I heard the pendulum jangle.

'No, no,' I shouted. I grabbed it and pushed it back against the wall.

We jumped back to 9.07.

Helen was in the bedroom. I had exactly a minute left.

'Harry,' she called. 'Darling, do you want to, or don't you?'

I was by the lounge window, muttering something.

I was out of touch with what my real self was doing in the normal time channel. The Helen talking to me now was a phantom.

It was I, not Helen and everybody else, who was riding the merry-go-round.

Jump.

9.07-15.

Helen was standing in the doorway.

'. . . down to the . . . the . . .' I was saying.

Helen watched me, frozen. A fraction of a minute left.

I started to walk over to her.

to walk over to her

ver to her

er

I came out of it like a man catapulted from a revolving door. I was stretched out flat on the sofa, a hard aching pain running from the top of my head down past my right ear into my neck.

I looked at the time. 9.45. I could hear Helen moving around in the dining room. I lay there, steadying the room round me, and in a few minutes she came in carrying a tray and a couple of glasses.

'How do you feel?' she asked, making up an alka-seltzer.

I let it fizzle down and drank it.

'What happened?' I asked. 'Did I collapse?'

'Not exactly. You were watching the play. I thought you looked rather seedy so I suggested we go out for a drink. You went into a sort of convulsion.'

I stood up slowly and rubbed my neck. 'God, I didn't dream all that! I couldn't have done.'

'What was it about?'

'A sort of crazy merry-go-round –' The pain grabbed at my neck when I spoke. I went over to the set and switched it on. 'Hard to explain coherently. Time was –' I flinched as the pain bit in again.

'Sit down and rest,' Helen said. 'I'll come and join you. Like a drink?'

'Thanks. A big scotch.'

I looked at the set. On Channel 1 there was a breakdown sign, a cabaret on 2, a flood-lit stadium on 5, and a variety show on 9. No sign anywhere of either Diller's play or the panel game.

Helen brought the drink in and sat down on the sofa with me.

'It started off when we were watching the play,' I explained, massaging my neck.

'Sh, don't bother now. Just relax.'

I put my head on Helen's shoulder and looked up at the ceiling, listening to the sound coming from the variety show. I thought back through each turn of the round-about, wondering whether I could have dreamt it all.

Ten minutes later Helen said, 'Well, I didn't think much of that. And they're doing an encore. Good heavens.'

'Who are?' I asked. I watched the light from the screen flicker across her face.

'That team of acrobats. The something Brothers. One of them even slipped. How do you feel?'

'Fine.' I turned my head round and looked at the screen.

Three or four acrobats with huge v-torsos and skin briefs were doing simple handstands on to each other's arms. They finished the act and went into a more involved routine, throwing around a girl in leopard skin panties. The applause was deafening. I thought they were moderately good.

Two of them began to give what seemed to be a demonstration of dynamic tension, straining against each other like a pair of catatonic

bulls, their necks and legs locked, until one of them was levered slowly off the ground.

'Why do they keep on doing that?' Helen said. 'They've done it twice already.'

'I don't think they have,' I said. 'This is a slightly different act.'

The pivot man tremored, one of his huge banks of muscles collapsed, and the whole act toppled and then sprung apart.

'They slipped there the last time,' Helen said.

'No, no,' I pointed out quickly. 'That one was a headstand. Here they were stretched out horizontally.'

'You weren't watching,' Helen told me. She leant forward. 'Well, what are they playing at? They're repeating the whole thing for the third time.'

It was an entirely new act to me, but I didn't try to argue.

I sat up and looked at the clock.

10.05.

'Darling,' I said, putting my arm round her. 'Hold tight.'

'What do you mean?'

'This is the merry-go-round. And you're driving.'

1956

THE CONCENTRATION CITY

Noon talk on Millionth Street:

'Sorry, these are the West Millions. You want 9775335th East.'

'Dollar five a cubic foot? Sell!'

'Take a westbound express to 495th Avenue, cross over to a Redline elevator and go up a thousand levels to Plaza Terminal. Carry on south from there and you'll find it between 568th Avenue and 422nd Street.'

'There's a cave-in down at KEN County! Fifty blocks by twenty by thirty levels.'

'Listen to this – "PYROMANIACS STAGE MASS BREAKOUT! FIRE POLICE CORDON BAY COUNTY!"'

'It's a beautiful counter. Detects up to .005 per cent monoxide. Cost me three hundred dollars.'

'Have you seen those new intercity sleepers? They take only ten minutes to go up 3,000 levels!'

'Ninety cents a foot? Buy!'

'You say the idea came to you in a dream?' the voice snapped. 'You're sure no one else gave it to you.'

'No,' M. said. A couple of feet away from him a spot-lamp threw a cone of dirty yellow light into his face. He dropped his eyes from the glare and waited as the sergeant paced over to his desk, tapped his fingers on the edge and swung round on him again.

'You talked it over with your friends?'

'Only the first theory,' M. explained. 'About the possibility of flight.'

'But you told me the other theory was more important. Why keep it from them?'

M. hesitated. Outside somewhere a trolley shunted and clanged along the elevated. 'I was afraid they wouldn't understand what I meant.'

The sergeant laughed. 'Do you mean they would have thought you really were insane?'

M. shifted uncomfortably on the stool. Its seat was only six inches off the floor and his thighs felt like slabs of inflamed rubber. After three hours of cross-questioning logic had faded. 'The concept was a little abstract. There weren't any words for it.'

The sergeant shook his head. 'I'm glad to hear you say it.' He sat

down on the desk, watched M. for a moment and then went over to him.

'Now look,' he said confidentially. 'It's getting late. Do you still think both theories are reasonable?'

M. looked up. 'Aren't they?'

The sergeant turned to the man watching in the shadows by the window. 'We're wasting our time,' he snapped. 'I'll hand him over to Psycho. You've seen enough, haven't you, Doctor?'

The surgeon stared at his hands. He had taken no part in the interrogation, as if bored by the sergeant's method of approach.

'There's something I want to find out,' he said. 'Leave me alone with him for half an hour.'

When the sergeant had gone the surgeon sat down behind the desk and stared out of the window, listening to the dull hum of air through the ventilator shaft which rose out of the street below the station. A few roof lights were still burning and two hundred yards away a single policeman patrolled the iron catwalk running above the street, his boots ringing across the darkness.

M. sat on the stool, elbows between his knees, trying to edge a little life back into his legs.

Eventually the surgeon glanced down at the charge sheet.

```
Name.............  Franz M.
Age..............  20.
Occupation.......  Student.
Address..........  3599719 West 783rd St, Level
                   549-7705-45 KNI (Local).
Charge...........  Vagrancy.
```

'Tell me about this dream,' he said, idly flexing a steel rule between his hands as he looked across at M.

'I think you've heard everything, sir,' M. said.

'In detail.'

M. shifted uneasily. 'There wasn't much to it, and what I do remember isn't too clear now.'

The surgeon yawned. M. waited and then started to recite what he had already repeated twenty times.

'I was suspended in the air above a flat stretch of open ground, something like the floor of an enormous arena. My arms were out at my sides, and I was looking down, floating –'

'Hold on,' the surgeon interrupted. 'Are you sure you weren't swimming?'

'No,' M. said. 'I'm certain I wasn't. All around me there was free space. That was the most important part about it. There were no walls. Nothing but emptiness. That's all I remember.'

The surgeon ran his finger along the edge of the rule.

'Go on.'

'Well, the dream gave me the idea of building a flying machine. One of my friends helped me construct it.'

The surgeon nodded. Almost absently he picked up the charge sheet and crushed it with a single motion of his hand.

'Don't be absurd, Franz!' Gregson remonstrated. They took their places in the chemistry cafeteria queue. 'It's against the laws of hydrodynamics. Where would you get your buoyancy?'

'Suppose you had a rigid fabric vane,' Franz explained as they shuffled past the hatchways. 'Say ten feet across, like one of those composition wall sections, with hand grips on the ventral surface. And then you jumped down from the gallery at the Coliseum Stadium. What would happen?'

'You'd make a hole in the floor. Why?'

'No, seriously.'

'If it was large enough and held together you'd swoop down like a paper dart.'

'Glide,' Franz said. 'Right.' Thirty levels above them one of the intercity expresses roared over, rattling the tables and cutlery in the cafeteria. Franz waited until they reached a table and sat forward, his food forgotten.

'And say you attached a propulsive unit, such as a battery-driven ventilator fan, or one of those rockets they use on the Sleepers. With enough thrust to overcome your weight. What then?'

Gregson shrugged. 'If you could control the thing, you'd, you'd . . .' He frowned at Franz. 'What's the word? You're always using it.'

'Fly.'

'Basically, Matheson, the machine is simple,' Sanger, the physics lector, commented as they entered the science library. 'An elementary application of the Venturi Principle. But what's the point of it? A trapeze would serve its purpose equally well, and be far less dangerous. In the first place consider the enormous clearances it would require. I hardly think the traffic authorities will look upon it with any favour.'

'I know it wouldn't be practical here,' Franz admitted. 'But in a large open area it should be.'

'Allowed. I suggest you immediately negotiate with the Arena Garden on Level 347–25,' the lector said whimsically. 'I'm sure they'll be glad to hear about your scheme.'

Franz smiled politely. 'That wouldn't be large enough. I was really thinking of an area of totally free space. In three dimensions, as it were.'

Sanger looked at Franz curiously. 'Free space? Isn't that a contradiction in terms? Space is a dollar a cubic foot.' He scratched his nose. 'Have you begun to construct this machine yet?'

'No,' Franz said.

'In that event I should try to forget all about it. Remember, Matheson, the task of science is to consolidate existing knowledge, to systematize

and reinterpret the discoveries of the past, not to chase wild dreams into the future.'

He nodded and disappeared among the dusty shelves.

Gregson was waiting on the steps.

'Well?' he asked.

'Let's try it out this afternoon,' Franz said. 'We'll cut Text 5 Pharmacology. I know those Fleming readings backwards. I'll ask Dr McGhee for a couple of passes.'

They left the library and walked down the narrow, dimly-lit alley which ran behind the huge new civil engineering laboratories. Over seventy-five per cent of the student enrolment was in the architectural and engineering faculties, a meagre two per cent in pure sciences. Consequently the physics and chemistry libraries were housed in the oldest quarter of the university, in two virtually condemned galvanized hutments which once contained the now closed philosophy school.

At the end of the alley they entered the university plaza and started to climb the iron stairway leading to the next level a hundred feet above. Halfway up a white-helmeted F.P. checked them cursorily with his detector and waved them past.

'What did Sanger think?' Gregson asked as they stepped up into 637th Street and walked across to the suburban elevator station.

'He's no use at all,' Franz said. 'He didn't even begin to understand what I was talking about.'

Gregson laughed ruefully. 'I don't know whether I do.'

Franz took a ticket from the automat and mounted the down platform. An elevator dropped slowly towards him, its bell jangling.

'Wait until this afternoon,' he called back. 'You're really going to see something.'

The floor manager at the Coliseum initialled the two passes.

'Students, eh? All right.' He jerked a thumb at the long package Franz and Gregson were carrying. 'What have you got there?'

'It's a device for measuring air velocities,' Franz told him.

The manager grunted and released the stile.

Out in the centre of the empty arena Franz undid the package and they assembled the model. It had a broad fan-like wing of wire and paper, a narrow strutted fuselage and a high curving tail.

Franz picked it up and launched it into the air. The model glided for twenty feet and then slithered to a stop across the sawdust.

'Seems to be stable,' Franz said. 'We'll tow it first.'

He pulled a reel of twine from his pocket and tied one end to the nose. As they ran forward the model lifted gracefully into the air and followed them around the stadium, ten feet off the floor.

'Let's try the rockets now,' Franz said. He adjusted the wing and tail settings and fitted three firework display rockets into a wire bracket mounted above the wing.

The stadium was four hundred feet in diameter and had a roof two hundred and fifty feet high. They carried the model over to one side and Franz lit the tapers.

There was a burst of flame and the model accelerated across the floor, two feet in the air, a bright trail of coloured smoke spitting out behind it. Its wings rocked gently from side to side. Suddenly the tail burst into flames. The model lifted steeply and looped up towards the roof, stalled just before it hit one of the pilot lights and dived down into the sawdust.

They ran across to it and stamped out the glowing cinders. 'Franz!' Gregson shouted. 'It's incredible! It actually works.'

Franz kicked the shattered fuselage. 'Of course it works,' he said impatiently. 'But as Sanger said, what's the point of it?'

'The point? It flies! Isn't that enough?'

'No. I want one big enough to hold me.'

'Franz, slow down. Be reasonable. Where could you fly it?'

'I don't know,' Franz said fiercely. 'But there must be somewhere!'

The floor manager and two assistants, carrying fire extinguishers, ran across the stadium to them.

'Did you hide the matches?' Franz asked quickly. 'They'll lynch us if they think we're Pyros.'

Three afternoons later Franz took the elevator up 150 levels to 677–98, where the Precinct Estate Office had its bureau.

'There's a big development between 493 and 554 in the next sector,' one of the clerks told him. 'I don't know whether that's any good to you. Sixty blocks by twenty by fifteen levels.'

'Nothing bigger?' Franz queried.

The clerk looked up. 'Bigger? No. *What* are you looking for – a slight case of agoraphobia?'

Franz straightened the maps spread across the counter. 'I wanted to find an area of more or less continuous development. Two or three hundred blocks long.'

The clerk shook his head and went back to his ledger. 'Didn't you go to engineering school?' he asked scornfully. 'The City won't take it. One hundred blocks is the maximum.'

Franz thanked him and left.

A south-bound express took him to the development in two hours. He left the car at the detour point and walked the three hundred yards to the end of the level.

The street, a seedy but busy thoroughfare of garment shops and small business premises running through the huge ten-mile-thick B.I.R. Industrial Cube, ended abruptly in a tangle of ripped girders and concrete. A steel rail had been erected along the edge and Franz looked down over it into the cavity, three miles long, a mile wide and twelve hundred feet deep, which thousands of engineers and demolition workers were tearing out of the matrix of the City.

Eight hundred feet below him unending lines of trucks and railcars carried away the rubble and debris, and clouds of dust swirled up into the arc-lights blazing down from the roof. As he watched, a chain of explosions ripped along the wall on his left and the whole face slipped and fell slowly towards the floor, revealing a perfect cross-section through fifteen levels of the City.

Franz had seen big developments before, and his own parents had died in the historic QUA County cave-in ten years earlier, when three master-pillars had sheared and two hundred levels of the City had abruptly sunk ten thousand feet, squashing half a million people like flies in a concertina, but the enormous gulf of emptiness still stunned his imagination.

All around him, standing and sitting on the jutting terraces of girders, a silent throng stared down.

'They say they're going to build gardens and parks for us,' an elderly man at Franz's elbow remarked in a patient voice. 'I even heard they might be able to get a tree. It'll be the only tree in the whole county.'

A man in a frayed sweat-shirt spat over the rail. 'That's what they always say. At a dollar a foot promises are all they can waste space on.'

Below them a woman who had been looking out into the air started to simper nervously. Two bystanders took her by the arms and tried to lead her away. The woman began to thresh about and an F.P. came over and pulled her away roughly.

'Poor fool,' the man in the sweat-shirt commented. 'She probably lived out there somewhere. They gave her ninety cents a foot when they took it away from her. She doesn't know yet she'll have to pay a dollar ten to get it back. Now they're going to start charging five cents an hour just to sit up here and watch.'

Franz looked out over the railing for a couple of hours and then bought a postcard from one of the vendors and walked back to the elevator.

He called in to see Gregson before returning to the student dormitory. The Gregsons lived in the West millions on 985th Avenue, in a top three-room flat right under the roof. Franz had known them since his parents' death, but Gregson's mother still regarded him with a mixture of sympathy and suspicion. As she let him in with her customary smile of welcome he noticed her glancing at the detector mounted in the hall.

Gregson was in his room, happily cutting out frames of paper and pasting them on to a great rickety construction that vaguely resembled Franz's model.

'Hullo, Franz. What was it like?'

Franz shrugged. 'Just a development. Worth seeing.'

Gregson pointed to his construction. 'Do you think we can try it out there?'

'We could do.' Franz sat down on the bed. He picked up a paper dart lying beside him and tossed it out of the window. It swam into the street,

lazed down in a wide spiral and vanished into the open mouth of the ventilator shaft.

'When are you going to build another model?' Gregson asked.

'I'm not.'

Gregson looked up. 'Why? You've proved your theory.'

'That's not what I'm after.'

'I don't get you, Franz. What are you after?'

'Free space.'

'Free?' Gregson repeated.

Franz nodded. 'In both senses.'

Gregson shook his head sadly and snipped out another paper panel. 'Franz, you're mad.'

Franz stood up. 'Take this room,' he said. 'It's twenty feet by fifteen by ten. Extend its dimensions infinitely. What do you find?'

'A development.'

'Infinitely!'

'Non-functional space.'

'Well?' Franz asked patiently.

'The concept's absurd.'

'Why?'

'Because it couldn't exist.'

Franz pounded his forehead in despair. '*Why* couldn't it?'

Gregson gestured with the scissors. 'It's self-contradictory. Like the statement "I am lying". Just a verbal freak. Interesting theoretically, but it's pointless to press it for meaning.' He tossed the scissors on to the table. 'And anyway, do you know how much free space would cost?'

Franz went over to the bookshelf and pulled out one of the volumes. 'Let's have a look at your street atlas.' He turned to the index. 'This gives a thousand levels. KNI County, one hundred thousand cubic miles, population 30 million.'

Gregson nodded.

Franz closed the atlas. 'Two hundred and fifty counties, including KNI, together form the 493rd Sector, and an association of 1,500 adjacent sectors comprise the 298th Local Union.' He broke off and looked at Gregson. 'As a matter of interest, ever heard of it?'

Gregson shook his head. 'No. How did –'

Franz slapped the atlas on to the table. 'Roughly 4×10^{15} cubic Great-Miles.' He leaned on the window-ledge. 'Now tell me: what lies beyond the 298th Local Union?'

'Other unions, I suppose,' Gregson said. 'I don't see your difficulty.'

'And beyond those?'

'Farther ones. Why not?'

'For ever?' Franz pressed.

'Well, as far as for ever is.'

'The great street directory in the old Treasury Library on 247th Street is the largest in the county,' Franz said. 'I went down there this morning. It

occupies three complete levels. Millions of volumes. But it doesn't extend beyond the 598th Local Union. No one there had any idea what lay farther out. Why not?'

'Why should they?' Gregson asked. 'Franz, what are you driving at?'

Franz walked across to the door. 'Come down to the Bio-History Museum. I'll show you.'

The birds perched on humps of rock or waddled about the sandy paths between the water pools.

'"Archaeopteryx",' Franz read off one of the cage indicators. The bird, lean and mildewed, uttered a painful croak when he fed a handful of beans to it.

'Some of these birds have the remnants of a pectoral girdle,' Franz said. 'Minute fragments of bone embedded in the tissues around their rib cages.'

'Wings?'

'Dr McGhee thinks so.'

They walked out between the lines of cages.

'When does he think they were flying?'

'Before the Foundation,' Franz said. 'Three million years ago.'

When they were outside the museum they started down 859th Avenue. Halfway down the street a dense crowd had gathered and people were packed into the windows and balconies above the elevated, watching a squad of Fire Police break their way into a house.

The bulkheads at either end of the block had been closed and heavy steel traps sealed off the stairways from the levels above and below. The ventilator and exhaust shafts were silent and already the air was stale and soupy.

'Pyros,' Gregson murmured. 'We should have brought our masks.'

'It's only a scare,' Franz said. He pointed to the monoxide detectors which were out everywhere, their long snouts sucking at the air. The dial needles stood safely at zero. 'Let's wait in the restaurant opposite.'

They edged their way over to the restaurant, sat down in the window and ordered coffee. This, like everything else on the menu, was cold. All cooking appliances were thermostated to a maximum 95°F., and only in the more expensive restaurants and hotels was it possible to obtain food that was at most tepid.

Below them in the street a lot of shouting went up. The Fire Police seemed unable to penetrate beyond the ground floor of the house and had started to baton back the crowd. An electric winch was wheeled up and bolted to the girders running below the kerb, and half a dozen heavy steel grabs were carried into the house and hooked round the walls.

Gregson laughed. 'The owners are going to be surprised when they get home.'

Franz was watching the house. It was a narrow shabby dwelling sandwiched between a large wholesale furniture store and a new supermarket.

An old sign running across the front had been painted over and evidently the ownership had recently changed. The present tenants had made a half-hearted attempt to convert the ground floor room into a cheap stand-up diner. The Fire Police appeared to be doing their best to wreck everything, and pies and smashed crockery were strewn all over the pavement.

The noise died away and everyone waited as the winch began to revolve. The hawsers wound in and tautened, and the front wall of the house staggered outwards in rigid jerky movements.

Suddenly there was a yell from the crowd.

Franz raised his arm. 'Up there! Look!'

On the fourth floor a man and woman had come to the window and were looking down helplessly. The man lifted the woman on to the ledge and she crawled out and clung to one of the waste pipes. Bottles were lobbed up at them and bounced down among the police. A wide crack split the house from top to bottom and the floor on which the man was standing dropped and catapulted him backwards out of sight. Then one of the lintels in the first floor snapped and the entire house tipped over and collapsed.

Franz and Gregson stood up, almost knocking over the table.

The crowd surged forward through the cordon. When the dust had settled there was nothing left but a heap of masonry and twisted beams. Embedded in this was the battered figure of the man. Almost smothered by the dust he moved slowly, trying to free himself with one hand, and the crowd started roaring again as one of the grabs wound in and dragged him down under the rubble.

The manager of the restaurant pushed past Franz and leant out of the window, his eyes fixed on the dial of a portable detector. Its needle, like all the others, pointed to zero.

A dozen hoses were playing on the remains of the house and after a few minutes the crowd shifted and began to thin out.

The manager switched off the detector and left the window, nodding to Franz. 'Damn Pyros. You can relax now, boys.'

Franz pointed at the detector. 'Your dial was dead. There wasn't a trace of monoxide anywhere here. How do you know they were Pyros?'

'Don't worry, we know.' He smiled obliquely. 'We don't want that sort of element in this neighbourhood.'

Franz shrugged and sat down. 'I suppose that's one way of getting rid of them.'

The manager eyed Franz. 'That's right, boy. This is a good dollar five neighbourhood.' He smirked to himself. 'Maybe a dollar six now everybody knows about our safety record.'

'Careful, Franz,' Gregson warned him when the manager had gone. 'He may be right. Pyromaniacs do take over small cafés and food bars.'

Franz stirred his coffee. 'Dr McGhee estimates that at least fifteen per cent of the City's population are submerged Pyros. He's convinced

the number's growing and that eventually the whole City will flame-out.'

He pushed away his coffee. 'How much money have you got?'

'On me?'

'Altogether.'

'About thirty dollars.'

'I've saved fifteen,' Franz said. 'Forty-five dollars; that should be enough for three or four weeks.'

'Where?' Gregson asked.

'On a Supersleeper.'

'Super –!' Gregson broke off, alarmed. 'Three or four weeks! What do you mean?'

'There's only one way to find out,' Franz explained calmly. 'I can't just sit here thinking. Somewhere there's free space and I'll ride the Sleeper until I find it. Will you lend me your thirty dollars?'

'But Franz –'

'If I don't find anything within a couple of weeks I'll change tracks and come back.'

'But the ticket will cost . . .' Gregson searched '. . . billions. Forty-five dollars won't even get you out of the Sector.'

'That's just for coffee and sandwiches,' Franz said. 'The ticket will be free.' He looked up from the table. 'You know . . .'

Gregson shook his head doubtfully. 'Can you try that on the Supersleepers?'

'Why not? If they query it I'll say I'm going back the long way round. Greg, will you?'

'I don't know if I should.' Gregson played helplessly with his coffee. 'Franz, how can there be free space? How?'

'That's what I'm going to find out,' Franz said. 'Think of it as my first physics practical.'

Passenger distances on the transport system were measured point to point by the application of $a = \sqrt{b^2 + c^2 + d^2}$. The actual itinerary taken was the passenger's responsibility, and as long as he remained within the system he could choose any route he liked. Tickets were checked only at the station exits, where necessary surcharges were collected by an inspector. If the passenger was unable to pay the surcharge – ten cents a mile – he was sent back to his original destination.

Franz and Gregson entered the station on 984th Street and went over to the large console where tickets were automatically dispensed. Franz put in a penny and pressed the destination button marked 984. The machine rumbled, coughed out a ticket, and the change slot gave him back his coin.

'Well, Greg, goodbye,' Franz said as they moved towards the barrier. 'I'll see you in about two weeks. They're covering me down at the dormitory. Tell Sanger I'm on Fire Duty.'

'What if you don't get back, Franz?' Gregson asked. 'Suppose they take you off the Sleeper?'

'How can they? I've got my ticket.'

'And if you do find free space? Will you come back then?'

'If I can.'

Franz patted Gregson on the shoulder reassuringly, waved and disappeared among the commuters.

He took the local Suburban Green to the district junction in the next county. The Green Line train travelled at an interrupted 70 m.p.h. and the ride took two and a half hours.

At the junction he changed to an express elevator which lifted him out of the sector in ninety minutes, at 400 m.p.h. Another fifty minutes in a Through-Sector Special brought him to the Mainline Terminus which served the Union.

There he bought a coffee and gathered his determination together. Supersleepers ran east and west, halting at this and every tenth station. The next arrived in seventy-two hours time, westbound.

The Mainline Terminus was the largest station Franz had seen, a mile-long cavern thirty levels in depth. Hundreds of elevator shafts sank through the station and the maze of platforms, escalators, restaurants, hotels and theatres seemed like an exaggerated replica of the City itself.

Getting his bearings from one of the information booths, Franz made his way up an escalator to Tier 15, where the Supersleepers berthed. Running the length of the station were two steel vacuum tunnels each three hundred feet in diameter, supported at thirty-four intervals by huge concrete buttresses.

Franz walked along the platform and stopped by the telescopic gangway that plunged into one of the airlocks. Two hundred and seventy degrees true, he thought, gazing up at the curving underbelly of the tunnel. It must come out somewhere. He had forty-five dollars in his pocket, sufficient coffee and sandwich money to last him three weeks, six if he needed it, time anyway to find the City's end.

He passed the next three days nursing cups of coffee in any of the thirty cafeterias in the station, reading discarded newspapers and sleeping in the local Red trains which ran four-hour journeys round the nearest sector.

When at last the Supersleeper came in he joined the small group of Fire Police and municipal officials waiting by the gangway, and followed them into the train. There were two cars; a sleeper which no one used, and a day coach.

Franz took an inconspicuous corner seat near one of the indicator panels in the day coach, and pulled out his notebook ready to make his first entry.

1st Day: West 270°. Union 4,350.

'Coming out for a drink?' a Fire Captain across the aisle asked. 'We have a ten-minute break here.'

'No thanks,' Franz said. 'I'll hold your seat for you.'

Dollar five a cubic foot. Free space, he knew, would bring the price down. There was no need to leave the train or make too many inquiries. All he had to do was borrow a paper and watch the market averages.

2nd Day: West 270°. Union 7,550.

'They're slowly cutting down on these Sleepers,' someone told him. 'Everyone sits in the day coach. Look at this one. Seats sixty, and only four people in it. There's no need to move around. People are staying where they are. In a few years there'll be nothing left but the suburban services.'

97 *cents.*

At an average of a dollar a cubic foot, Franz calculated idly, it's so far worth about $\$4 \times 10^{27}$.

'Going on to the next stop, are you? Well, goodbye, young fellow.'

Few of the passengers stayed on the Sleeper for more than three or four hours. By the end of the second day Franz's back and neck ached from the constant acceleration. He managed to take a little exercise walking up and down the narrow corridor in the deserted sleeping coach, but had to spend most of his time strapped to his seat as the train began its long braking runs into the next station.

3rd Day: West 270°. Federation 657.

'Interesting, but how could you demonstrate it?'

'It's just an odd idea of mine,' Franz said, screwing up the sketch and dropping it in the disposal chute. 'Hasn't any real application.'

'Curious, but it rings a bell somewhere.'

Franz sat up. 'Do you mean you've seen machines like this? In a newspaper or a book?'

'No, no. In a dream.'

Every half day's run the pilot signed the log, the crew handed over to their opposites on an Eastbound sleeper, crossed the platform and started back for home.

125 *cents.*

$\$8 \times 10^{28}$.

4th Day: West 270°. Federation 1,225.

'Dollar a cubic foot. You in the estate business?'

'Starting up,' Franz said easily. 'I'm hoping to open a new office of my own.'

He played cards, bought coffee and rolls from the dispenser in the washroom, watched the indicator panel and listened to the talk around him.

'Believe me, a time will come when each union, each sector, almost I might say, each street and avenue will have achieved complete local independence. Equipped with its own power services, aerators, reservoirs, farm laboratories . . .'

The car bore.

$\$6 \times 10^{75}$.

5th Day: West 270°. 17th Greater Federation.

At a kiosk on the station Franz bought a clip of razor blades and glanced at the brochure put out by the local chamber of commerce.

'12,000 levels, 98 cents a foot, unique Elm Drive, fire safety records unequalled . . .'

He went back to the train, shaved, and counted the thirty dollars left. He was now ninety-five million Great-Miles from the suburban station on 984th Street and he knew he could not delay his return much longer. Next time he would save up a couple of thousand.

$\$7 \times 10^{127}$.

7th Day: West 270°. 212th Metropolitan Empire.

Franz peered at the indicator.

'Aren't we stopping here?' he asked a man three seats away. 'I wanted to find out the market average.'

'Varies. Anything from fifty cents a –'

'Fifty!' Franz shot back, jumping up. 'When's the next stop? I've got to get off!'

'Not here, son.' He put out a restraining hand. 'This is Night Town. You in real estate?'

Franz nodded, holding himself back. 'I thought . . .'

'Relax.' He came and sat opposite Franz. 'It's just one big slum. Dead areas. In places it goes as low as five cents. There are no services, no power.'

It took them two days to pass through.

'City Authority are starting to seal it off,' the man told him. 'Huge blocks. It's the only thing they can do. What happens to the people inside I hate to think.' He chewed on a sandwich. 'Strange, but there are a lot of these black areas. You don't hear about them, but they're growing. Starts in a back street in some ordinary dollar neighbourhood; a bottleneck in the sewage disposal system, not enough ash cans, and before you know it – a million cubic miles have gone back to jungle. They try a relief scheme, pump in a little cyanide, and then – brick it up. Once they do that they're closed for good.'

Franz nodded, listening to the dull humming air.

'Eventually there'll be nothing left but these black areas. The City will be one huge cemetery!'

10th Day: East 90°. 755th Greater Metropolitan –

'Wait!' Franz leapt out of his seat and stared at the indicator panel.

'What's the matter?' someone opposite asked.

'East!' Franz shouted. He banged the panel sharply with his hand but the lights held. 'Has this train changed direction?'

'No, it's eastbound,' another of the passengers told him. 'Are you on the wrong train?'

'It should be heading west,' Franz insisted. 'It has been for the last ten days.'

'Ten days!' the man exclaimed. 'Have you been on this sleeper for ten days?'

Franz went forward and found the car attendant. 'Which way is this train going? West?'

The attendant shook his head. 'East, sir. It's always been going east.'

'You're crazy,' Franz snapped. 'I want to see the pilot's log.'

'I'm afraid that isn't possible. May I see your ticket, sir?'

'Listen,' Franz said weakly, all the accumulated frustration of the last twenty years mounting inside him. 'I've been on this . . .'

He stopped and went back to his seat.

The five other passengers watched him carefully.

'Ten days,' one of them was still repeating in an awed voice.

Two minutes later someone came and asked Franz for his ticket.

'And of course it was completely in order,' the police surgeon commented. 'Strangely enough there's no regulation to prevent anyone else doing the same thing. I used to go for free rides myself when I was younger, though I never tried anything like your journey.'

He went back to the desk. 'We'll drop the charge,' he said. 'You're not a vagrant in any indictable sense, and the transport authorities can do nothing against you. How this curvature was built into the system they can't explain, it seems to be some inherent feature of the City itself. Now about yourself. Are you going to continue this search?'

'I want to build a flying machine,' M. said carefully. 'There must be free space somewhere. I don't know . . . perhaps on the lower levels.'

The surgeon stood up. 'I'll see the sergeant and get him to hand you over to one of our psychiatrists. He'll be able to help you with your dreams!'

The surgeon hesitated before opening the door. 'Look,' he began to explain, 'you can't get out of time, can you? Subjectively it's a plastic dimension, but whatever you do to yourself you'll never be able to stop that clock' – he pointed to the one on the desk – 'or make it run backwards. In exactly the same way you can't get out of the City.'

'The analogy doesn't hold,' M. said. He gestured at the walls around

them and the lights in the street outside. 'All this was built by us. The question nobody can answer is: what was here before we built it?'

'It's always been here,' the surgeon said. 'Not these particular bricks and girders, but others before them. You accept that time has no beginning and no end. The City is as old as time and continuous with it.'

'The first bricks were laid by someone,' M. insisted. 'There was the Foundation.'

'A myth. Only the scientists believe in that, and even they don't try to make too much of it. Most of them privately admit that the Foundation Stone is nothing more than a superstition. We pay it lip service out of convenience, and because it gives us a sense of tradition. Obviously there can't have been a first brick. If there was, how can you explain who laid it and, even more difficult, where they came from?'

'There must be free space somewhere,' M. said doggedly. 'The City must have bounds.'

'*Why?*' the surgeon asked. 'It can't be floating in the middle of nowhere. Or is that what you're trying to believe?'

M. sank back limply. 'No.'

The surgeon watched M. silently for a few minutes and paced back to the desk. 'This peculiar fixation of yours puzzles me. You're caught between what the psychiatrists call paradoxical faces. I suppose you haven't misinterpreted something you've heard about the Wall?'

M. looked up. 'Which wall?'

The surgeon nodded to himself. 'Some advanced opinion maintains that there's a wall around the City, through which it's impossible to penetrate. I don't pretend to understand the theory myself. It's far too abstract and sophisticated. Anyway I suspect they've confused this Wall with the bricked-up black areas you passed through on the Sleeper. I prefer the accepted view that the City stretches out in all directions without limits.'

He went over to the door. 'Wait here, and I'll see about getting you a probationary release. Don't worry, the psychiatrists will straighten everything out for you.'

When the surgeon had left M. stared at the floor, too exhausted to feel relieved. He stood up and stretched himself, walking unsteadily round the room.

Outside the last pilot lights were going out and the patrolman on the catwalk under the roof was using his torch. A police car roared down one of the avenues crossing the street, its rails screaming. Three lights snapped on along the street and then one by one went off again.

M. wondered why Gregson hadn't come down to the station. Then the calendar on the desk riveted his attention. The date exposed on the fly leaf was 12 August. That was the day he had started off on his journey – exactly three weeks ago.

Today!

* * *

Take a westbound Green to 298th Street, cross over at the intersection and get a Red elevator up to Level 237. Walk down to the station on Route 175, change to a 438 suburban and go down to 795th Street. Take a Blue line to the Plaza, get off at 4th and 275th, turn left at the roundabout and –

You're back where you first started from.

$Hell \times 10^n$.

1957

VENUS SMILES

Low notes on a high afternoon.

As we drove away after the unveiling my secretary said, 'Mr Hamilton, I suppose you realize what a fool you've made of yourself?'

'Don't sound so prim,' I told her. 'How was I to know Lorraine Drexel would produce something like that?'

'Five thousand dollars,' she said reflectively. 'It's nothing but a piece of old scrap iron. And the noise! Didn't you look at her sketches? What's the Fine Arts Committee for?'

My secretaries have always talked to me like this, and just then I could understand why. I stopped the car under the trees at the end of the square and looked back. The chairs had been cleared away and already a small crowd had gathered around the statue, staring up at it curiously. A couple of tourists were banging one of the struts, and the thin metal skeleton shuddered weakly. Despite this, a monotonous and high-pitched wailing sounded from the statue across the pleasant morning air, grating the teeth of passers-by.

'Raymond Mayo is having it dismantled this afternoon,' I said. 'If it hasn't already been done for us. I wonder where Miss Drexel is?'

'Don't worry, you won't see her in Vermilion Sands again. I bet she's halfway to Red Beach by now.'

I patted Carol on the shoulder. 'Relax. You looked beautiful in your new skirt. The Medicis probably felt like this about Michelangelo. Who are we to judge?'

'*You* are,' she said. 'You were on the committee, weren't you?'

'Darling,' I explained patiently. 'Sonic sculpture is the thing. You're trying to fight a battle the public lost thirty years ago.'

We drove back to my office in a thin silence. Carol was annoyed because she had been forced to sit beside me on the platform when the audience began to heckle my speech at the unveiling, but even so the morning had been disastrous on every count. What might be perfectly acceptable at Expo 75 or the Venice Biennale was all too obviously passé at Vermilion Sands.

When we had decided to commission a sonic sculpture for the square in the centre of Vermilion Sands, Raymond Mayo and I had agreed that we should patronize a local artist. There were dozens of professional sculptors in Vermilion Sands, but only three had deigned to present

themselves before the committee. The first two we saw were large, bearded men with enormous fists and impossible schemes – one for a hundred-foot-high vibrating aluminium pylon, and the other for a vast booming family group that involved over fifteen tons of basalt mounted on a megalithic step-pyramid. Each had taken an hour to be argued out of the committee room.

The third was a woman: Lorraine Drexel. This elegant and autocratic creature in a cartwheel hat, with her eyes like black orchids, was a sometime model and intimate of Giacometti and John Cage. Wearing a blue crêpe de Chine dress ornamented with lace serpents and other art nouveau emblems, she sat before us like some fugitive Salome from the world of Aubrey Beardsley. Her immense eyes regarded us with an almost hypnotic calm, as if she had discovered that very moment some unique quality in these two amiable dilettantes of the Fine Arts Committee.

She had lived in Vermilion Sands for only three months, arriving via Berlin, Calcutta and the Chicago New Arts Centre. Most of her sculpture to date had been scored for various Tantric and Hindu hymns, and I remembered her brief affair with a world-famous pop-singer, later killed in a car crash, who had been an enthusiastic devotee of the sitar. At the time, however, we had given no thought to the whining quarter-tones of this infernal instrument, so grating on the Western ear. She had shown us an album of her sculptures, interesting chromium constructions that compared favourably with the run of illustrations in the latest art magazines. Within half an hour we had drawn up a contract.

I saw the statue for the first time that afternoon thirty seconds before I started my speech to the specially selected assembly of Vermilion Sands notables. Why none of us had bothered to look at it beforehand I fail to understand. The title printed on the invitation cards – 'Sound and Quantum: Generative Synthesis 3' – had seemed a little odd, and the general shape of the shrouded statue even more suspicious. I was expecting a stylized human figure but the structure under the acoustic drapes had the proportions of a medium-sized radar aerial. However, Lorraine Drexel sat beside me on the stand, her bland eyes surveying the crowd below. A dream-like smile gave her the look of a tamed Mona Lisa.

What we saw after Raymond Mayo pulled the tape I tried not to think about. With its pedestal the statue was twelve feet high. Three spindly metal legs, ornamented with spikes and crosspieces, reached up from the plinth to a triangular apex. Clamped on to this was a jagged structure that at first sight seemed to be an old Buick radiator grille. It had been bent into a rough U five feet across, and the two arms jutted out horizontally, a single row of sonic cores, each about a foot long, poking up like the teeth of an enormous comb. Welded on apparently at random all over the statue were twenty or thirty filigree vanes.

That was all. The whole structure of scratched chromium had a blighted look like a derelict antenna. Startled a little by the first shrill

whoops emitted by the statue, I began my speech and was about halfway through when I noticed that Lorraine Drexel had left her seat beside me. People in the audience were beginning to stand up and cover their ears, shouting to Raymond to replace the acoustic drape. A hat sailed through the air over my head and landed neatly on one of the sonic cores. The statue was now giving out an intermittent high-pitched whine, a sitar-like caterwauling that seemed to pull apart the sutures of my skull. Responding to the boos and protests, it suddenly began to whoop erratically, the horn-like sounds confusing the traffic on the far side of the square.

As the audience began to leave their seats *en masse* I stuttered inaudibly to the end of my speech, the wailing of the statue interrupted by shouts and jeers. Then Carol tugged me sharply by the arm, her eyes flashing. Raymond Mayo pointed with a nervous hand.

The three of us were alone on the platform, the rows of overturned chairs reaching across the square. Standing twenty yards from the statue, which had now begun to whimper plaintively, was Lorraine Drexel. I expected to see a look of fury and outrage on her face, but instead her unmoving eyes showed the calm and implacable contempt of a grieving widow insulted at her husband's funeral. As we waited awkwardly, watching the wind carry away the torn programme cards, she turned on a diamond heel and walked across the square.

No one else wanted anything to do with the statue, so I was finally presented with it. Lorraine Drexel left Vermilion Sands the day it was dismantled. Raymond spoke briefly to her on the telephone before she went. I presumed she would be rather unpleasant and didn't bother to listen in on the extension.

'Well?' I asked. 'Does she want it back?'

'No.' Raymond seemed slightly preoccupied. 'She said it belonged to us.'

'You and me?'

'Everybody.' Raymond helped himself to the decanter of scotch on the veranda table. 'Then she started laughing.'

'Good. What at?'

'I don't know. She just said that we'd grow to like it.'

There was nowhere else to put the statue so I planted it out in the garden. Without the stone pedestal it was only six feet high. Shielded by the shrubbery, it had quietened down and now emitted a pleasant melodic harmony, its soft rondos warbling across the afternoon heat. The sitar-like twangs, which the statue had broadcast in the square like some pathetic love-call from Lorraine Drexel to her dead lover, had vanished completely, almost as if the statue had been rescored. I had been so stampeded by the disastrous unveiling that I had had little chance to see it and I thought it looked a lot better in the garden than it had done in Vermilion Sands, the chromium struts and abstract shapes standing out against the desert

like something in a vodka advertisement. After a few days I could almost ignore it.

A week or so later we were out on the terrace after lunch, lounging back in the deck chairs. I was nearly asleep when Carol said, 'Mr Hamilton, I think it's moving.'

'What's moving?'

Carol was sitting up, head cocked to one side. 'The statue. It looks different.'

I focused my eyes on the statue twenty feet away. The radiator grille at the top had canted around slightly but the three stems still seemed more or less upright.

'The rain last night must have softened the ground,' I said. I listened to the quiet melodies carried on the warm eddies of air, and then lay back drowsily. I heard Carol light a cigarette with four matches and walk across the veranda.

When I woke in an hour's time she was sitting straight up in the deck chair, a frown creasing her forehead.

'Swallowed a bee?' I asked. 'You look worried.'

Then something caught my eye.

I watched the statue for a moment. 'You're right. It is moving.'

Carol nodded. The statue's shape had altered perceptibly. The grille had spread into an open gondola whose sonic cores seemed to feel at the sky, and the three stem-pieces were wider apart. All the angles seemed different.

'I thought you'd notice it eventually,' Carol said as we walked over to it. 'What's it made of?'

'Wrought iron – I think. There must be a lot of copper or lead in it. The heat is making it sag.'

'Then why is it sagging upwards instead of down?'

I touched one of the shoulder struts. It was springing elastically as the air moved across the vanes and went on vibrating against my palm. I gripped it in both hands and tried to keep it rigid. A low but discernible pulse pumped steadily against me.

I backed away from it, wiping the flaking chrome off my hands. The Mozartian harmonies had gone, and the statue was now producing a series of low Mahler-like chords. As Carol stood there in her bare feet I remembered that the height specification we had given to Lorraine Drexel had been exactly two metres. But the statue was a good three feet higher than Carol, the gondola at least six or seven across. The spars and struts looked thicker and stronger.

'Carol,' I said. 'Get me a file, would you? There are some in the garage.'

She came back with two files and a hacksaw.

'Are you going to cut it down?' she asked hopefully.

'Darling, this is an original Drexel.' I took one of the files. 'I just want to convince myself that I'm going insane.'

I started cutting a series of small notches all over the statue, making sure they were exactly the width of the file apart. The metal was soft and worked easily; on the surface there was a lot of rust but underneath it had a bright sappy glint.

'All right,' I said when I had finished. 'Let's go and have a drink.'

We sat on the veranda and waited. I fixed my eyes on the statue and could have sworn that it didn't move. But when we went back an hour later the gondola had swung right round again, hanging down over us like an immense metal mouth.

There was no need to check the notch intervals against the file. They were all at least double the original distance apart.

'Mr Hamilton,' Carol said. 'Look at this.'

She pointed to one of the spikes. Poking through the outer scale of chrome were a series of sharp little nipples. One or two were already beginning to hollow themselves. Unmistakably they were incipient sonic cores.

Carefully I examined the rest of the statue. All over it new shoots of metal were coming through: arches, barbs, sharp double helixes, twisting the original statue into a thicker and more elaborate construction. A medley of half-familiar sounds, fragments of a dozen overtures and symphonies, murmured all over it. The statue was well over twelve feet high. I felt one of the heavy struts and the pulse was stronger, beating steadily through the metal, as if it was thrusting itself on to the sound of its own music.

Carol was watching me with a pinched and worried look.

'Take it easy,' I said. 'It's only growing.'

We went back to the veranda and watched.

By six o'clock that evening it was the size of a small tree. A spirited simultaneous rendering of Brahms's *Academic Festival Overture* and Rachmaninov's First Piano Concerto trumpeted across the garden.

'The strangest thing about it,' Raymond said the next morning, raising his voice above the din, 'is that it's still a Drexel.'

'Still a piece of sculpture, you mean?'

'More than that. Take any section of it and you'll find the original motifs being repeated. Each vane, each helix has all the authentic Drexel mannerisms, almost as if she herself were shaping it. Admittedly, this penchant for the late Romantic composers is a little out of keeping with all that sitar twanging, but that's rather a good thing, if you ask me. You can probably expect to hear some Beethoven any moment now – the Pastoral Symphony, I would guess.'

'Not to mention all five piano concertos – played at once,' I said sourly. Raymond's loquacious delight in this musical monster out in the garden annoyed me. I closed the veranda windows, wishing that he himself had installed the statue in the living room of his downtown apartment. 'I take it that it won't go on growing for ever?'

Carol handed Raymond another scotch. 'What do you think we ought to do?'

Raymond shrugged. 'Why worry?' he said airily. 'When it starts tearing the house down cut it back. Thank God we had it dismantled. If this had happened in Vermilion Sands . . .'

Carol touched my arm. 'Mr Hamilton, perhaps that's what Lorraine Drexel expected. She wanted it to start spreading all over the town, the music driving everyone crazy –'

'Careful,' I warned her. 'You're running away with yourself. As Raymond says, we can chop it up any time we want to and melt the whole thing down.'

'Why don't you, then?'

'I want to see how far it'll go,' I said. In fact my motives were more mixed. Clearly, before she left, Lorraine Drexel had set some perverse jinx at work within the statue, a bizarre revenge on us all for deriding her handiwork. As Raymond had said, the present babel of symphonic music had no connection with the melancholy cries the statue had first emitted. Had those forlorn chords been intended to be a requiem for her dead lover – or even, conceivably, the beckoning calls of a still unsurrendered heart? Whatever her motives, they had now vanished into this strange travesty lying across my garden.

I watched the statue reaching slowly across the lawn. It had collapsed under its own weight and lay on its side in a huge angular spiral, twenty feet long and about fifteen feet high, like the skeleton of a futuristic whale. Fragments of the *Nutcracker Suite* and Mendelssohn's 'Italian' Symphony sounded from it, overlaid by sudden blaring excerpts from the closing movements of Grieg's Piano Concerto. The selection of these hack classics seemed deliberately designed to get on my nerves.

I had been up with the statue most of the night. After Carol went to bed I drove my car on to the strip of lawn next to the house and turned on the headlamps. The statue stood out almost luminously in the darkness, booming away to itself, more and more of the sonic cores budding out in the yellow glare of the lights. Gradually it lost its original shape; the toothed grille enveloped itself and then put out new struts and barbs that spiralled upwards, each throwing off secondary and tertiary shoots in its turn. Shortly after midnight it began to lean and then suddenly toppled over.

By now its movement was corkscrew. The plinth had been carried into the air and hung somewhere in the middle of the tangle, revolving slowly, and the main foci of activity were at either end. The growth rate was accelerating. We watched a new shoot emerge. As one of the struts curved round a small knob poked through the flaking chrome. Within a minute it grew into a spur an inch long, thickened, began to curve and five minutes later had developed into a full-throated sonic core twelve inches long.

Raymond pointed to two of my neighbours standing on the roofs of their houses a hundred yards away, alerted by the music carried across to

them. 'You'll soon have everyone in Vermilion Sands out here. If I were you, I'd throw an acoustic drape over it.'

'If I could find one the size of a tennis court. It's time we did something, anyway. See if you can trace Lorraine Drexel. I'm going to find out what makes this statue go.'

Using the hacksaw, I cut off a two-foot limb and handed it to Dr Blackett, an eccentric but amiable neighbour who sometimes dabbled in sculpture himself. We walked back to the comparative quiet of the veranda. The single sonic core emitted a few random notes, fragments from a quartet by Webern.

'What do you make of it?'

'Remarkable,' Blackett said. He bent the bar between his hands. 'Almost plastic.' He looked back at the statue. 'Definite circumnutation there. Probably phototropic as well. Hmm, almost like a plant.'

'Is it alive?'

Blackett laughed. 'My dear Hamilton, of course not. How can it be?'

'Well, where is it getting its new material? From the ground?'

'From the air. I don't know yet, but I imagine it's rapidly synthesizing an allotropic form of ferrous oxide. In other words, a purely physical rearrangement of the constituents of rust.' Blackett stroked his heavy brush moustache and stared at the statue with a dream-like eye. 'Musically, it's rather curious – an appalling conglomeration of almost every bad note ever composed. Somewhere the statue must have suffered some severe sonic trauma. It's behaving as if it had been left for a week in a railroad shunting yard. Any idea what happened?'

'Not really.' I avoided his glance as we walked back to the statue. It seemed to sense us coming and began to trumpet out the opening bars of Elgar's 'Pomp and Circumstance' march. Deliberately breaking step, I said to Blackett: 'So in fact all I have to do to silence the thing is chop it up into two-foot lengths?'

'If it worries you. However, it would be interesting to leave it, assuming you can stand the noise. There's absolutely no danger of it going on indefinitely.' He reached up and felt one of the spars. 'Still firm, but I'd say it was almost there. It will soon start getting pulpy like an over-ripe fruit and begin to shred off and disintegrate, playing itself out, one hopes, with Mozart's *Requiem* and the finale of the *Götterdämmerung*.' He smiled at me, showing his strange teeth. 'Die, if you prefer it.'

However, he had reckoned completely without Lorraine Drexel.

At six o'clock the next morning I was woken by the noise. The statue was now fifty feet long and crossing the flower beds on either side of the garden. It sounded as if a complete orchestra were performing some Mad Hatter's symphony out in the centre of the lawn. At the far end, by the rockery, the sonic cores were still working their way through the Romantic catalogue, a babel of Mendelssohn, Schubert and Grieg, but near the veranda the cores

were beginning to emit the jarring and syncopated rhythms of Stravinsky and Stockhausen.

I woke Carol and we ate a nervous breakfast.

'Mr Hamilton!' she shouted. 'You've got to stop it!' The nearest tendrils were only five feet from the glass doors of the veranda. The largest limbs were over three inches in diameter and the pulse thudded through them like water under pressure in a fire hose.

When the first police cars cruised past down the road I went into the garage and found the hacksaw.

The metal was soft and the blade sank through it quickly. I left the pieces I cut off in a heap to one side, random notes sounding out into the air. Separated from the main body of the statue, the fragments were almost inactive, as Dr Blackett had stated. By two o'clock that afternoon I had cut back about half the statue and got it down to manageable proportions.

'That should hold it,' I said to Carol. I walked round and lopped off a few of the noisier spars. 'Tomorrow I'll finish it off altogether.'

I wasn't in the least surprised when Raymond called and said that there was no trace anywhere of Lorraine Drexel.

At two o'clock that night I woke as a window burst across the floor of my bedroom. A huge metal helix hovered like a claw through the fractured pane, its sonic core screaming down at me.

A half-moon was up, throwing a thin grey light over the garden. The statue had sprung back and was twice as large as it had been at its peak the previous morning. It lay all over the garden in a tangled mesh, like the skeleton of a crushed building. Already the advance tendrils had reached the bedroom windows, while others had climbed over the garage and were sprouting downwards through the roof, tearing away the galvanized metal sheets.

All over the statue thousands of sonic cores gleamed in the light thrown down from the window. At last in unison, they hymned out the finale of Bruckner's *Apocalyptic Symphony.*

I went into Carol's bedroom, fortunately on the other side of the house, and made her promise to stay in bed. Then I telephoned Raymond Mayo. He came around within an hour, an oxyacetylene torch and cylinders he had begged from a local contractor in the back seat of his car.

The statue was growing almost as fast as we could cut it back, but by the time the first light came up at a quarter to six we had beaten it.

Dr Blackett watched us slice through the last fragments of the statue. 'There's a section down in the rockery that might just be audible. I think it would be worth saving.'

I wiped the rust-stained sweat from my face and shook my head. 'No. I'm sorry, but believe me, once is enough.'

Blackett nodded in sympathy, and stared gloomily across the heaps of scrap iron which were all that remained of the statue.

Carol, looking a little stunned by everything, was pouring coffee and brandy. As we slumped back in two of the deck chairs, arms and faces black with rust and metal filings, I reflected wryly that no one could accuse the Fine Arts Committee of not devoting itself wholeheartedly to its projects.

I went off on a final tour of the garden, collecting the section Blackett had mentioned, then guided in the local contractor who had arrived with his truck. It took him and his two men an hour to load the scrap – an estimated ton and a half – into the vehicle.

'What do I do with it?' he asked as he climbed into the cab. 'Take it to the museum?'

'No!' I almost screamed. 'Get rid of it. Bury it somewhere, or better still, have it melted down. As soon as possible.'

When they had gone Blackett and I walked around the garden together. It looked as if a shrapnel shell had exploded over it. Huge divots were strewn all over the place, and what grass had not been ripped up by the statue had been trampled away by us. Iron filings lay on the lawn like dust, a faint ripple of lost notes carried away on the steepening sunlight.

Blackett bent down and scooped up a handful of grains. 'Dragon's teeth. You'll look out of the window tomorrow and see the B Minor Mass coming up.' He let it run out between his fingers. 'However, I suppose that's the end of it.'

He couldn't have been more wrong.

Lorraine Drexel sued us. She must have come across the newspaper reports and realized her opportunity. I don't know where she had been hiding, but her lawyers materialized quickly enough, waving the original contract and pointing to the clause in which we guaranteed to protect the statue from any damage that might be done to it by vandals, livestock or other public nuisance. Her main accusation concerned the damage we had done to her reputation – if we had decided not to exhibit the statue we should have supervised its removal to some place of safekeeping, not openly dismembered it and then sold off the fragments to a scrap dealer. This deliberate affront had, her lawyers insisted, cost her commissions to a total of at least fifty thousand dollars.

At the preliminary hearings we soon realized that, absurdly, our one big difficulty was going to be proving to anyone who had not been there that the statue had actually started growing. With luck we managed to get several postponements, and Raymond and I tried to trace what we could of the statue. All we found were three small struts, now completely inert, rusting in the sand on the edge of one of the junkyards in Red Beach. Apparently taking me at my word, the contractor had shipped the rest of the statue to a steel mill to be melted down.

Our only case now rested on what amounted to a plea of self-defence.

Raymond and myself testified that the statue had started to grow, and then Blackett delivered a long homily to the judge on what he believed to be the musical shortcomings of the statue. The judge, a crusty and short-tempered old man of the hanging school, immediately decided that we were trying to pull his leg. We were finished from the start.

The final judgment was not delivered until ten months after we had first unveiled the statue in the centre of Vermilion Sands, and the verdict, when it came, was no surprise.

Lorraine Drexel was awarded thirty thousand dollars.

'It looks as if we should have taken the pylon after, all,' I said to Carol as we left the courtroom. 'Even the step-pyramid would have been less trouble.'

Raymond joined us and we went out on to the balcony at the end of the corridor for some air.

'Never mind,' Carol said bravely. 'At least it's all over with.'

I looked out over the rooftops of Vermilion Sands, thinking about the thirty thousand dollars and wondering whether we would have to pay it ourselves.

The court building was a new one and by an unpleasant irony ours had been the first case to be heard there. Much of the floor and plasterwork had still to be completed, and the balcony was untiled. I was standing on an exposed steel crossbeam; one or two floors down someone must have been driving a rivet into one of the girders, and the beam under my feet vibrated soothingly.

Then I noticed that there were no sounds of riveting going on anywhere, and that the movement under my feet was not so much a vibration as a low rhythmic pulse.

I bent down and pressed my hands against the beam. Raymond and Carol watched me curiously. 'Mr Hamilton, what is it?' Carol asked when I stood up.

'Raymond,' I said. 'How long ago did they first start on this building? The steel framework, anyway.'

'Four months, I think. Why?'

'Four.' I nodded slowly. 'Tell me, how long would you say it took any random piece of scrap iron to be reprocessed through a steel mill and get back into circulation?'

'Years, if it lay around in the wrong junkyards.'

'But if it had actually arrived at the steel mill?'

'A month or so. Less.'

I started to laugh, pointing to the girder. 'Feel that! Go on, feel it!'

Frowning at me, they knelt down and pressed their hands to the girder. Then Raymond looked up at me sharply.

I stopped laughing. 'Did you feel it?'

'Feel it?' Raymond repeated. 'I can *hear* it. Lorraine Drexel – the statue. It's here!'

Carol was patting the girder and listening to it. 'I think it's humming,' she said, puzzled. 'It sounds like the statue.'

When I started to laugh again Raymond held my arm. 'Snap out of it, the whole building will be singing soon!'

'I know,' I said weakly. 'And it won't be just this building either.' I took Carol by the arm. 'Come on, let's see if it's started.'

We went up to the top floor. The plasterers were about to move in and there were trestles and laths all over the place. The walls were still bare brick, girders at fifteen-foot intervals between them.

We didn't have to look very far.

Jutting out from one of the steel joists below the roof was a long metal helix, hollowing itself slowly into a delicate sonic core. Without moving, we counted a dozen others. A faint twanging sound came from them, like early arrivals at a rehearsal of some vast orchestra of sitar-players, seated on every plain and hilltop of the earth. I remembered when we had last heard the music, as Lorraine Drexel sat beside me at the unveiling in Vermilion Sands. The statue had made its call to her dead lover, and now the refrain was to be taken up again.

'An authentic Drexel,' I said. 'All the mannerisms. Nothing much to look at yet, but wait till it really gets going.'

Raymond wandered round, his mouth open. 'It'll tear the building apart. Just think of the noise.'

Carol was staring up at one of the shoots. 'Mr Hamilton, you said they'd melted it all down.'

'They did, angel. So it got back into circulation, touching off all the other metal it came into contact with. Lorraine Drexel's statue is here, in this building, in a dozen other buildings, in ships and planes and a million new automobiles. Even if it's only one screw or ball-bearing, that'll be enough to trigger the rest off.'

'They'll stop it,' Carol said.

'They might,' I admitted. 'But it'll probably get back again somehow. A few pieces always will.' I put my arm round her waist and began to dance to the strange abstracted music, for some reason as beautiful now as Lorraine Drexel's wistful eyes. 'Did you say it was all over? Carol, it's only just beginning. The whole world will be singing.'

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For the first few days all went well.

'Keep away from windows and don't think about it,' Dr Neill told them. 'As far as you're concerned it was just another compulsion. At eleven thirty or twelve go down to the gym and throw a ball around, play some table-tennis. At two they're running a film for you in the Neurology theatre. Read the papers for a couple of hours, put on some records. I'll be down at six. By seven you'll be in a manic swing.'

'Any chance of a sudden blackout, Doctor?' Avery asked.

'Absolutely none,' Neill said. 'If you get tired, rest, of course. That's the one thing you'll probably have a little difficulty getting used to. Remember, you're still using only 3,500 calories, so your kinetic level – and you'll notice this most by day – will be about a third lower. You'll have to take things easier, make allowances. Most of these have been programmed in for you, but start learning to play chess, focus that inner eye.'

Gorrell leaned forward. 'Doctor,' he asked, 'if we want to, can we look out of the windows?'

Dr Neill smiled. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'The wires are cut. You couldn't go to sleep now if you tried.'

Neill waited until the three men had left the lecture room on their way back to the Recreation Wing and then stepped down from the dais and shut the door. He was a short, broad-shouldered man in his fifties, with a sharp, impatient mouth and small features. He swung a chair out of the front row and straddled it deftly.

'Well?' he asked.

Morley was sitting on one of the desks against the back wall, playing aimlessly with a pencil. At thirty he was the youngest member of the team working under Neill at the Clinic, but for some reason Neill liked to talk to him.

He saw Neill was waiting for an answer and shrugged.

'Everything seems to be all right,' he said. 'Surgical convalescence is over. Cardiac rhythms and EEG are normal. I saw the X-rays this morning and everything has sealed beautifully.'

Neill watched him quizzically. 'You don't sound as if you approve.'

Morley laughed and stood up. 'Of course I do.' He walked down the aisle between the desks, white coat unbuttoned, hands sunk deep in his

pockets. 'No, so far you've vindicated yourself on every point. The party's only just beginning, but the guests are in damn good shape. No doubt about it. I thought three weeks was a little early to bring them out of hypnosis, but you'll probably be right there as well. Tonight is the first one they take on their own. Let's see how they are tomorrow morning.'

'What are you secretly expecting?' Neill asked wryly. 'Massive feedback from the medulla?'

'No,' Morley said. 'There again the psychometric tests have shown absolutely nothing coming up at all. Not a single trauma.' He stared at the blackboard and then looked round at Neill. 'Yes, as a cautious estimate I'd say you've succeeded.'

Neill leaned forward on his elbows. He flexed his jaw muscles. 'I think I've more than succeeded. Blocking the medullary synapses has eliminated a lot of material I thought would still be there – the minor quirks and complexes, the petty aggressive phobias, the bad change in the psychic bank. Most of them have gone, or at least they don't show in the tests. However, they're the side targets, and thanks to you, John, and to everyone else in the team, we've hit a bull's eye on the main one.'

Morley murmured something, but Neill ran on in his clipped voice. 'None of you realize it yet, but this is as big an advance as the step the first ichthyoid took out of the protozoic sea 300 million years ago. At last we've freed the mind, raised it out of that archaic sump called sleep, its nightly retreat into the medulla. With virtually one cut of the scalpel we've added twenty years to those men's lives.'

'I only hope they know what to do with them,' Morley commented.

'Come, John,' Neill snapped back. 'That's not an argument. What they do with the time is their responsibility anyway. They'll make the most of it, just as we've always made the most, eventually, of any opportunity given us. It's too early to think about it yet, but visualize the universal application of our technique. For the first time Man will be living a full twenty-four hour day, not spending a third of it as an invalid, snoring his way through an eight-hour peepshow of infantile erotica.'

Tired, Neill broke off and rubbed his eyes. 'What's worrying you?'

Morley made a small, helpless gesture with one hand. 'I'm not sure, it's just that I . . .' He played with the plastic brain mounted on a stand next to the blackboard. Reflected in one of the frontal whorls was a distorted image of Neill, with a twisted chinless face and vast domed cranium. Sitting alone among the desks in the empty lecture room he looked like an insane genius patiently waiting to take an examination no one could set him.

Morley turned the model with his finger, watched the image blur and dissolve. Whatever his doubts, Neill was probably the last person to understand them.

'I know all you've done is close off a few of the loops in the hypothalamus, and I realize the results are going to be spectacular. You'll probably precipitate the greatest social and economic revolution since the Fall. But for some reason I can't get that story of Chekov's out

of my mind – the one about the man who accepts a million-rouble bet that he can't shut himself up alone for ten years. He tries to, nothing goes wrong, but one minute before the time is up he deliberately steps out of his room. Of course, he's insane.'

'So?'

'I don't know. I've been thinking about it all week.'

Neill let out a light snort. 'I suppose you're trying to say that sleep is some sort of communal activity and that these three men are now isolated, exiled from the group unconscious, the dark oceanic dream. Is that it?'

'Maybe.'

'Nonsense, John. The further we hold back the unconscious the better. We're reclaiming some of the marshland. Physiologically sleep is nothing more than an inconvenient symptom of cerebral anoxaemia. It's not *that* you're afraid of missing, it's the dream. You want to hold on to your front-row seat at the peepshow.'

'No,' Morley said mildly. Sometimes Neill's aggressiveness surprised him; it was almost as if he regarded sleep itself as secretly discreditable, a concealed vice. 'What I really mean is that for better or worse Lang, Gorrell and Avery are now stuck with themselves. They're never going to be able to get away, not even for a couple of minutes, let alone eight hours. How much of yourself can you stand? Maybe you need eight hours off a day just to get over the shock of being yourself. Remember, you and I aren't always going to be around, feeding them with tests and films. What will happen if they get fed up with themselves?'

'They won't,' Neill said. He stood up, suddenly bored by Morley's questions. 'The total tempo of their lives will be lower than ours, these stresses and tensions won't begin to crystallize. We'll soon seem like a lot of manic-depressives to them, running round like dervishes half the day, then collapsing into a stupor the other half.'

He moved towards the door and reached out to the light switch. 'Well, I'll see you at six o'clock.'

They left the lecture room and started down the corridor together.

'What are you doing now?' Morley asked.

Neill laughed. 'What do you think?' he said. 'I'm going to get a good night's sleep.'

A little after midnight Avery and Gorrell were playing table-tennis in the floodlit gymnasium. They were competent players, and passed the ball backwards and forwards with a minimum of effort. Both felt strong and alert; Avery was sweating slightly, but this was due to the arc-lights blazing down from the roof – maintaining, for safety's sake, an illusion of continuous day – rather than to any excessive exertion of his own. The oldest of the three volunteers, a tall and somewhat detached figure, with a lean, closed face, he made no attempt to talk to Gorrell and concentrated on adjusting himself to the period ahead. He knew he would find no trace of fatigue, but as he played he carefully

checked his respiratory rhythms and muscle tonus, and kept one eye on the clock.

Gorrell, a jaunty, self-composed man, was also subdued. Between strokes he glanced cautiously round the gymnasium, noting the hangar-like walls, the broad, polished floor, the shuttered skylights in the roof. Now and then, without realizing it, he fingered the circular trepan scar at the back of his head.

Out in the centre of the gymnasium a couple of armchairs and a sofa had been drawn up round a gramophone, and here Lang was playing chess with Morley, doing his section of night duty. Lang hunched forward over the chessboard. Wiry-haired and aggressive, with a sharp nose and mouth, he watched the pieces closely. He had played regularly against Morley since he arrived at the Clinic four months earlier, and the two were almost equally matched, with perhaps a slight edge to Morley. But tonight Lang had opened with a new attack and after ten moves had completed his development and begun to split Morley's defence. His mind felt clear and precise, focused sharply on the game in front of him, though only that morning had he finally left the cloudy limbo of post-hypnosis through which he and the two others had drifted for three weeks like lobotomized phantoms.

Behind him, along one wall of the gymnasium, were the offices housing the control unit. Over his shoulder he saw a face peering at him through the circular observation window in one of the doors. Here, at constant alert, a group of orderlies and interns sat around waiting by their emergency trollies. (The end door, into a small ward containing three cots, was kept carefully locked.) After a few moments the face withdrew. Lang smiled at the elaborate machinery watching over him. His transference on to Neill had been positive and he had absolute faith in the success of the experiment. Neill had assured him that, at worst, the sudden accumulation of metabolites in his bloodstream might induce a mild torpor, but his brain would be unimpaired.

'Nerve fibre, Robert,' Neill had told him time and again, 'never fatigues. The brain cannot tire.'

While he waited for Morley to move he checked the time from the clock mounted against the wall. Twelve twenty. Morley yawned, his face drawn under the grey skin. He looked tired and drab. He slumped down into the armchair, face in one hand. Lang reflected how frail and primitive those who slept would soon seem, their minds sinking off each evening under the load of accumulating toxins, the edge of their awareness worn and frayed. Suddenly he realized that at that very moment Neill himself was asleep. A curiously disconcerting vision of Neill, huddled in a rumpled bed two floors above, his blood-sugar low, and his mind drifting, rose before him.

Lang laughed at his own conceit, and Morley retrieved the rook he had just moved.

'I must be going blind. What am I doing?'

'No,' Lang said. He started to laugh again. 'I've just discovered I'm awake.'

Morley smiled. 'We'll have to put that down as one of the sayings of the week.' He replaced the rook, sat up and looked across at the table-tennis pair. Gorrell had hit a fast backhand low over the net and Avery was running after the ball.

'They seem to be okay. How about you?'

'Right on top of myself,' Lang said. His eyes flicked up and down the board and he moved before Morley caught his breath back.

Usually they went right through into the end-game, but tonight Morley had to concede on the twentieth move.

'Good,' he said encouragingly. 'You'll be able to take on Neill soon. Like another?'

'No. Actually the game bores me. I can see that's going to be a problem.'

'You'll face it. Give yourself time to find your legs.'

Lang pulled one of the Bach albums out of its rack in the record cabinet. He put a Brandenburg Concerto on the turntable and lowered the sapphire. As the rich, contrapuntal patterns chimed out he sat back, listening intently to the music.

Morley thought: Absurd. How fast can you run? Three weeks ago you were strictly a hep-cat.

The next few hours passed rapidly.

At one thirty they went up to the Surgery, where Morley and one of the interns gave them a quick physical, checking their renal clearances, heart rate and reflexes.

Dressed again, they went into the empty cafeteria for a snack and sat on the stools, arguing what to call this new fifth meal. Avery suggested 'Midfood', Morley 'Munch'.

At two they took their places in the Neurology theatre, and spent a couple of hours watching films of the hypno-drills of the past three weeks.

When the programme ended they started down for the gymnasium, the night almost over. They were still relaxed and cheerful; Gorrell led the way, playfully teasing Lang over some of the episodes in the films, mimicking his trance-like walk.

'Eyes shut, mouth open,' he demonstrated, swerving into Lang, who jumped nimbly out of his way. 'Look at you; you're doing it even now. Believe me, Lang, you're not awake, you're somnambulating.' He called back to Morley, 'Agreed, Doctor?'

Morley swallowed a yawn. 'Well, if he is, that makes two of us.' He followed them along the corridor, doing his best to stay awake, feeling as if he, and not the three men in front of him, had been without sleep for the last three weeks.

Though the Clinic was quiet, at Neill's orders all lights along the corridors and down the stairway had been left on. Ahead of them two

orderlies checked that windows they passed were safely screened and doors were shut. Nowhere was there a single darkened alcove or shadow-trap.

Neill had insisted on this, reluctantly acknowledging a possible reflex association between darkness and sleep: 'Let's admit it. In all but a few organisms the association *is* strong enough to be a reflex. The higher mammals depend for their survival on a highly acute sensory apparatus, combined with a varying ability to store and classify information. Plunge them into darkness, cut off the flow of visual data to the cortex, and they're paralysed. Sleep is a defence reflex. It lowers the metabolic rate, conserves energy, increases the organism's survival-potential by merging it into its habitat . . .'

On the landing halfway down the staircase was a wide, shuttered window that by day opened out on to the parkscape behind the Clinic. As he passed it Gorrell stopped. He went over, released the blind, then unlatched the shutter.

Still holding it closed, he turned to Morley, watching from the flight above.

'Taboo, Doctor?' he asked.

Morley looked at each of the three men in turn. Gorrell was calm and unperturbed, apparently satisfying nothing more sinister than an idle whim. Lang sat on the rail, watching curiously with an expression of clinical disinterest. Only Avery seemed slightly anxious, his thin face wan and pinched. Morley had an irrelevant thought: four a.m. shadow – they'll need to shave twice a day. Then: why isn't Neill here? He knew they'd make for a window as soon as they got the chance.

He noticed Lang giving him an amused smile and shrugged, trying to disguise his uneasiness.

'Go ahead, if you want to. As Neill said, the wires are cut.'

Gorrell threw back the shutter, and they clustered round the window and stared out into the night. Below, pewter-grey lawns stretched towards the pines and low hills in the distance. A couple of miles away on their left a neon sign winked and beckoned.

Neither Gorrell nor Lang noticed any reaction, and their interest began to flag within a few moments. Avery felt a sudden lift under the heart, then controlled himself. His eyes began to sift the darkness; the sky was clear and cloudless, and through the stars he picked out the narrow, milky traverse of the galactic rim. He watched it silently, letting the wind cool the sweat on his face and neck.

Morley stepped over to the window and leaned his elbows on the sill next to Avery. Out of the corner of his eye he carefully waited for any motor tremor – a fluttering eyelid, accelerated breathing – that would signal a reflex discharging. He remembered Neill's warning: 'In Man sleep is largely volitional, and the reflex is conditioned by habit. But just because we've cut out the hypothalamic loops regulating the flow of consciousness doesn't mean the reflex won't discharge down some other pathway. However, sooner or later we'll have

to take the risk and give them a glimpse of the dark side of the sun.'

Morley was musing on this when something nudged his shoulder.

'Doctor,' he heard Lang say. 'Doctor Morley.'

He pulled himself together with a start. He was alone at the window. Gorrell and Avery were halfway down the next flight of stairs.

'What's up?' Morley asked quickly.

'Nothing,' Lang assured him. 'We're just going back to the gym.' He looked closely at Morley. 'Are you all right?'

Morley rubbed his face. 'God, I must have been asleep.' He glanced at his watch. Four twenty. They had been at the window for over fifteen minutes. All he could remember was leaning on the sill. 'And I was worried about *you*.'

Everybody was amused, Gorrell particularly. 'Doctor,' he drawled, 'if you're interested I can recommend you to a good narcotomist.'

After five o'clock they felt a gradual ebb of tonus from their arm and leg muscles. Renal clearances were falling and breakdown products were slowly clogging their tissues. Their palms felt damp and numb, the soles of their feet like pads of sponge rubber. The sensation was vaguely unsettling, allied to no feelings of mental fatigue.

The numbness spread. Avery noticed it stretching the skin over his cheekbones, pulling at his temples and giving him a slight frontal migraine. He doggedly turned the pages of a magazine, his hands like lumps of putty.

Then Neill came down, and they began to revive. Neill looked fresh and spruce, bouncing on the tips of his toes.

'How's the night shift going?' he asked briskly, walking round each one of them in turn, smiling as he sized them up. 'Feel all right?'

'Not too bad, Doctor,' Gorrell told him. 'A slight case of insomnia.'

Neill roared, slapped him on the shoulder and led the way up to the Surgery laboratory.

At nine, shaved and in fresh clothes, they assembled in the lecture room. They felt cool and alert again. The peripheral numbness and slight head torpor had gone as soon as the detoxication drips had been plugged in, and Neill told them that within a week their kidneys would have enlarged sufficiently to cope on their own.

All morning and most of the afternoon they worked on a series of IQ, associative and performance tests. Neill kept them hard at it, steering swerving blips of light around a cathode screen, juggling with intricate numerical and geometric sequences, elaborating word-chains.

He seemed more than satisfied with the results.

'Shorter access times, deeper memory traces,' he pointed out to Morley when the three men had gone off at five for the rest period. 'Barrels of prime psychic marrow.' He gestured at the test cards spread out across the desk in his office. 'And you were worried about the Unconscious.

Look at those Rorschachs of Lang's. Believe me, John, I'll soon have him reminiscing about his foetal experiences.'

Morley nodded, his first doubts fading.

Over the next two weeks either he or Neill was with the men continuously, sitting out under the floodlights in the centre of the gymnasium, assessing their assimilation of the eight extra hours, carefully watching for any symptoms of withdrawal. Neill carried everyone along, from one programme phase to the next, through the test periods, across the long hours of the interminable nights, his powerful ego injecting enthusiasm into every member of the unit.

Privately, Morley worried about the increasing emotional overlay apparent in the relationship between Neill and the three men. He was afraid they were becoming conditioned to identify Neill with the experiment. (Ring the meal bell and the subject salivates; but suddenly stop ringing the bell after a long period of conditioning and it temporarily loses the ability to feed itself. The hiatus barely harms a dog, but it might trigger disaster in an already oversensitized psyche.)

Neill was fully alert to this. At the end of the first two weeks, when he caught a bad head cold after sitting up all night and decided to spend the next day in bed, he called Morley into his office.

'The transference is getting much too positive. It needs to be eased off a little.'

'I agree,' Morley said. 'But how?'

'Tell them I'll be asleep for forty-eight hours,' Neill said. He picked up a stack of reports, plates and test cards and bundled them under one arm. 'I've deliberately overdosed myself with sedative to get some rest. I'm worn to a shadow, full fatigue syndrome, load-cells screaming. Lay it on.'

'Couldn't that be rather drastic?' Morley asked. 'They'll hate you for it.'

But Neill only smiled and went off to requisition an office near his bedroom.

That night Morley was on duty in the gymnasium from ten p.m. to six a.m. As usual he first checked that the orderlies were ready with their emergency trollies, read through the log left by the previous supervisor, one of the senior interns, and then went over to the circle of chairs. He sat back on the sofa next to Lang and leafed through a magazine, watching the three men carefully. In the glare of the arc-lights their lean faces had a sallow, cyanosed look. The senior intern had warned him that Avery and Gorrell might overtire themselves at table-tennis, but by eleven p.m. they stopped playing and settled down in the armchairs. They read desultorily and made two trips up to the cafeteria, escorted each time by one of the orderlies. Morley told them about Neill, but surprisingly none of them made any comment.

Midnight came slowly. Avery read, his long body hunched up in an armchair. Gorrell played chess against himself.

Morley dozed.

Lang felt restless. The gymnasium's silence and absence of movement oppressed him. He switched on the gramophone and played through a Brandenburg, analysing its theme-trains. Then he ran a word-association test on himself, turning the pages of a book and using the top right-hand corner words as the control list.

Morley leaned over. 'Anything come up?' he asked.

'A few interesting responses.' Lang found a note-pad and jotted something down. 'I'll show them to Neill in the morning – or whenever he wakes up.' He gazed up pensively at the arc-lights. 'I was just speculating. What do you think the next step forward will be?'

'Forward where?' Morley asked.

Lang gestured expansively. 'I mean up the evolutionary slope. Three hundred million years ago we became air-breathers and left the seas behind. Now we've taken the next logical step forward and eliminated sleep. What's next?'

Morley shook his head. 'The two steps aren't analogous. Anyway, in point of fact you haven't left the primeval sea behind. You're still carrying a private replica of it around as your bloodstream. All you did was encapsulate a necessary piece of the physical environment in order to escape it.'

Lang nodded. 'I was thinking of something else. Tell me, has it ever occurred to you how completely death-orientated the psyche is?'

Morley smiled. 'Now and then,' he said, wondering where this led.

'It's curious,' Lang went on reflectively. 'The pleasure-pain principle, the whole survival-compulsion apparatus of sex, the Super-Ego's obsession with tomorrow – most of the time the psyche can't see farther than its own tombstone. Now why has it got this strange fixation? For one very obvious reason.' He tapped the air with his forefinger. 'Because every night it's given a pretty convincing reminder of the fate in store for it.'

'You mean the black hole,' Morley suggested wryly. 'Sleep?'

'Exactly. It's simply a pseudo-death. Of course, you're not aware of it, but it must be terrifying.' He frowned. 'I don't think even Neill realizes that, far from being restful, sleep is a genuinely traumatic experience.'

So that's it, Morley thought. The great father analyst has been caught napping on his own couch. He tried to decide which were worse – patients who knew a lot of psychiatry, or those who only knew a little.

'Eliminate sleep,' Lang was saying, 'and you also eliminate all the fear and defence mechanisms erected round it. Then, at last, the psyche has a chance to orientate towards something more valid.'

'Such as . . . ?' Morley asked.

'I don't know. Perhaps . . . Self?'

'Interesting,' Morley commented. It was three ten a.m. He decided to spend the next hour going through Lang's latest test cards.

He waited a discretionary five minutes, then stood up and walked over to the surgery office.

Lang hooked an arm across the back of the sofa and watched the orderly room door.

'What's Morley playing at?' he asked. 'Have either of you seen him anywhere?'

Avery lowered his magazine. 'Didn't he go off into the orderly room?'

'Ten minutes ago,' Lang said. 'He hasn't looked in since. There's supposed to be someone on duty with us continuously. Where is he?'

Gorrell, playing solitaire chess, looked up from his board. 'Perhaps these late nights are getting him down. You'd better wake him before Neill finds out. He's probably fallen asleep over a batch of your test cards.'

Lang laughed and settled down on the sofa. Gorrell reached out to the gramophone, took a record out of the rack and slid it on to the turntable.

As the gramophone began to hum Lang noticed how silent and deserted the gymnasium seemed. The Clinic was always quiet, but even at night a residual ebb and flow of sound – a chair dragging in the orderly room, a generator charging under one of the theatres – eddied through and kept it alive.

Now the air was flat and motionless. Lang listened carefully. The whole place had the dead, echoless feel of an abandoned building.

He stood up and strolled over to the orderly room. He knew Neill discouraged casual conversation with the control crew, but Morley's absence puzzled him.

He reached the door and peered through the window to see if Morley was inside.

The room was empty.

The light was on. Two emergency trollies stood in their usual place against the wall near the door, a third was in the middle of the floor, a pack of playing cards strewn across its deck, but the group of three or four interns had gone.

Lang hesitated, reached down to open the door, and found it had been locked.

He tried the handle again, then called out over his shoulder:

'Avery. There's nobody in here.'

'Try next door. They're probably being briefed for tomorrow.'

Lang stepped over to the surgery office. The light was off but he could see the white enamelled desk and the big programme charts round the wall. There was no one inside.

Avery and Gorrell were watching him.

'Are they in there?' Avery asked.

'No.' Lang turned the handle. 'The door's locked.'

Gorrell switched off the gramophone and he and Avery came over. They tried the two doors again.

'They're here somewhere,' Avery said. 'There must be at least one person on duty.' He pointed to the end door. 'What about that one?'

'Locked,' Lang said. '69 always has been. I think it leads down to the basement.'

'Let's try Neill's office,' Gorrell suggested. 'If they aren't in there we'll stroll through to Reception and try to leave. This must be some trick of Neill's.'

There was no window in the door to Neill's office. Gorrell knocked, waited, knocked again more loudly.

Lang tried the handle, then knelt down. 'The light's off,' he reported.

Avery turned and looked round at the two remaining doors out of the gymnasium, both in the far wall, one leading up to the cafeteria and the Neurology wing, the other into the car park at the rear of the Clinic.

'Didn't Neill hint that he might try something like this on us?' he asked. 'To see whether we can go through a night on our own.'

'But Neill's asleep,' Lang objected. 'He'll be in bed for a couple of days. Unless . . .'

Gorrell jerked his head in the direction of the chairs. 'Come on. He and Morley are probably watching us now.'

They went back to their seats.

Gorrell dragged the chess stool over to the sofa and set up the pieces. Avery and Lang stretched out in armchairs and opened magazines, turning the pages deliberately. Above them the banks of arc-lights threw their wide cones of light down into the silence.

The only noise was the slow left-right, left-right motion of the clock.

Three fifteen a.m.

The shift was imperceptible. At first a slight change of perspective, a fading and regrouping of outlines. Somewhere a focus slipped, a shadow swung slowly across a wall, its angles breaking and lengthening. The motion was fluid, a procession of infinitesimals, but gradually its total direction emerged.

The gymnasium was shrinking. Inch by inch, the walls were moving inwards, encroaching across the periphery of the floor. As they shrank towards each other their features altered: the rows of skylights below the ceiling blurred and faded, the power cable running along the base of the wall merged into the skirting board, the square baffles of the air vents vanished into the grey distemper.

Above, like the undersurface of an enormous lift, the ceiling sank towards the floor . . .

Gorrell leaned his elbows on the chessboard, face sunk in his hands. He had locked himself in a perpetual check, but he continued to shuttle the pieces in and out of one of the corner squares, now and then gazing into the air for inspiration, while his eyes roved up and down the walls around him.

Somewhere, he knew, Neill was watching him.

He moved, looked up and followed the wall opposite him down to the far corner, alert for the telltale signs of a retractable panel. For some while he had been trying to discover Neill's spy-hole, but without any success. The walls were blank and featureless; he had twice covered every square foot of the two facing him, and apart from the three doors there appeared to be no fault or aperture of even the most minute size anywhere on their surface.

After a while his left eye began to throb painfully, and he pushed away the chessboard and lay back. Above him a line of fluorescent tubes hung down from the ceiling, mounted in checkered plastic brackets that diffused the light. He was about to comment on his search for the spy-hole to Avery and Lang when he realized that any one of them could conceal a microphone.

He decided to stretch his legs, stood up and sauntered off across the floor. After sitting over the chessboard for half an hour he felt cramped and restless, and would have enjoyed tossing a ball up and down, or flexing his muscles on a rowing machine. But annoyingly no recreational facilities, apart from the three armchairs and the gramophone, had been provided.

He reached the end wall and wandered round, listening for any sound from the adjacent rooms. He was beginning to resent Neill spying on him and the entire keyhole conspiracy, and he noted with relief that it was a quarter past three: in under three hours it would all be over.

The gymnasium closed in. Now less than half its original size, its walls bare and windowless, it was a vast, shrinking box. The sides slid into each other, merging along an abstract hairline, like planes severing in a multi-dimensional flux. Only the clock and a single door remained . . .

Lang had discovered where the microphone was hidden.

He sat forward in his chair, cracking his knuckles until Gorrell returned, then rose and offered him his seat. Avery was in the other armchair, feet up on the gramophone.

'Sit down for a bit,' Lang said. 'I feel like a stroll.'

Gorrell lowered himself into the chair. 'I'll ask Neill if we can have a ping-pong table in here. It should help pass the time and give us some exercise.'

'A good idea,' Lang agreed. 'If we can get the table through the door. I doubt if there's enough room in here, even if we moved the chairs right up against the wall.'

He walked off across the floor, surreptitiously peering through the orderly room window. The light was on, but there was still no one inside.

He ambled over to the gramophone and paced up and down near it for a few moments. Suddenly he swung round and caught his foot under the flex leading to the wall socket.

The plug fell out on to the floor. Lang left it where it lay, went over and sat down on the arm of Gorrell's chair.

'I've just disconnected the microphone,' he confided.

Gorrell looked round carefully. 'Where was it?'

Lang pointed. 'Inside the gramophone.' He laughed softly. 'I thought I'd pull Neill's leg. He'll be wild when he realizes he can't hear us.'

'Why do you think it was in the gramophone?' Gorrell asked.

'What better place? Besides, it couldn't be anywhere else. Apart from in there.' He gestured at the light bowl suspended from the centre of the ceiling. 'It's empty except for the two bulbs. The gramophone is the obvious place. I had a feeling it was there, but I wasn't sure until I noticed we had a gramophone, but no records.'

Gorrell nodded sagely.

Lang moved away, chuckling to himself.

Above the door of Room 69 the clock ticked on at three fifteen.

The motion was accelerating. What had once been the gymnasium was now a small room, seven feet wide, a tight, almost perfect cube. The walls plunged inwards, along colliding diagonals, only a few feet from their final focus . . .

Avery noticed Gorrell and Lang pacing around his chair. 'Either of you want to sit down yet?' he asked.

They shook their heads. Avery rested for a few minutes and then climbed out of the chair and stretched himself.

'Quarter past three,' he remarked, pressing his hands against the ceiling. 'This is getting to be a long night.'

He leaned back to let Gorrell pass him, and then started to follow the others round the narrow space between the armchair and the walls.

'I don't know how Neill expects us to stay awake in this hole for twenty-four hours a day,' he went on. 'Why haven't we got a television set in here? Even a radio would be something.'

They sidled round the chair together, Gorrell, followed by Avery, with Lang completing the circle, their shoulders beginning to hunch, their heads down as they watched the floor, their feet falling into the slow, leaden rhythm of the clock.

This, then, was the manhole: a narrow, vertical cubicle, a few feet wide, six deep. Above, a solitary, dusty bulb gleamed down from a steel grille. As if crumbling under the impetus of their own momentum, the surface of the walls had coarsened, the texture was that of stone, streaked and pitted . . .

Gorrell bent down to loosen one of his shoelaces and Avery bumped into him sharply, knocking his shoulder against the wall.

'All right?' he asked, taking Gorrell's arm. 'This place is a little overcrowded. I can't understand why Neill ever put us in here.'

He leaned against the wall, head bowed to prevent it from touching the ceiling, and gazed about thoughtfully.

Lang stood squeezed into the corner next to him, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

Gorrell squatted down on his heels below them.

'What's the time?' he asked.

'I'd say about three fifteen,' Lang offered. 'More or less.'

'Lang,' Avery asked, 'where's the ventilator here?'

Lang peered up and down the walls and across the small square of ceiling. 'There must be one somewhere.' Gorrell stood up and they shuffled about, examining the floor between their feet.

'There may be a vent in the light grille,' Gorrell suggested. He reached up and slipped his fingers through the cage, running them behind the bulb.

'Nothing there. Odd. I should have thought we'd use the air in here within half an hour.'

'Easily,' Avery said. 'You know, there's something –'

Just then Lang broke in. He gripped Avery's elbow.

'Avery,' he asked. 'Tell me. How did we get here?'

'What do you mean, get here? We're on Neill's team.'

Lang cut him off. 'I know that.' He pointed at the floor. 'I mean, in here.'

Gorrell shook his head. 'Lang, relax. How do you think? Through the door.'

Lang looked squarely at Gorrell, then at Avery.

'What door?' he asked calmly.

Gorrell and Avery hesitated, then swung round to look at each wall in turn, scanning it from floor to ceiling. Avery ran his hands over the heavy masonry, then knelt down and felt the floor, digging his fingers at the rough stone slabs. Gorrell crouched beside him, scrabbling at the thin seams of dirt.

Lang backed out of their way into a corner, and watched them impassively. His face was calm and motionless, but in his left temple a single vein fluttered insanely.

When they finally stood up, staring at each other unsteadily, he flung himself between them at the opposite wall.

'Neill! Neill!' he shouted. He pounded angrily on the wall with his fists. 'Neill! Neill!'

Above him the light began to fade.

Morley closed the door of the surgery office behind him and went over to the desk. Though it was three fifteen a.m., Neill was probably awake, working on the latest material in the office next to his bedroom. Fortunately that afternoon's test cards, freshly marked by one of the interns, had only just reached his in-tray.

Morley picked out Lang's folder and started to sort through the cards. He suspected that Lang's responses to some of the key words and

suggestion triggers lying disguised in the question forms might throw illuminating sidelights on to the real motives behind his equation of sleep and death.

The communicating door to the orderly room opened and an intern looked in.

'Do you want me to take over in the gym, Doctor?'

Morley waved him away. 'Don't bother. I'm going back in a moment.'

He selected the cards he wanted and began to initial his withdrawals. Glad to get away from the glare of the arc-lights, he delayed his return as long as he could, and it was three twenty-five a.m. when he finally left the office and stepped back into the gymnasium.

The men were sitting where he had left them. Lang watched him approach, head propped comfortably on a cushion. Avery was slouched down in his armchair, nose in a magazine, while Gorrell hunched over the chessboard, hidden behind the sofa.

'Anybody feel like coffee?' Morley called out, deciding they needed some exercise.

None of them looked up or answered. Morley felt a flicker of annoyance, particularly at Lang, who was staring past him at the clock.

Then he saw something that made him stop.

Lying on the polished floor ten feet from the sofa was a chess piece. He went over and picked it up. The piece was the black king. He wondered how Gorrell could be playing chess with one of the two essential pieces of the game missing when he noticed three more pieces lying on the floor near by.

His eyes moved to where Gorrell was sitting.

Scattered over the floor below the chair and sofa was the rest of the set. Gorrell was slumped over the stool. One of his elbows had slipped and the arm dangled between his knees, knuckles resting on the floor. The other hand supported his face. Dead eyes peered down at his feet.

Morley ran over to him, shouting: 'Lang! Avery! Get the orderlies!'

He reached Gorrell and pulled him back off the stool.

'Lang!' he called again.

Lang was still staring at the clock, his body in the stiff, unreal posture of a waxworks dummy.

Morley let Gorrell loll back on to the sofa, leaned over and glanced at Lang's face.

He crossed to Avery, stretched out behind the magazine, and jerked his shoulder. Avery's head bobbed stiffly. The magazine slipped and fell from his hands, leaving his fingers curled in front of his face.

Morley stepped over Avery's legs to the gramophone. He switched it on, gripped the volume control and swung it round to full amplitude.

Above the orderly room door an alarm bell shrilled out through the silence.

* * *

'Weren't you with them?' Neill asked sharply.

'No,' Morley admitted. They were standing by the door of the emergency ward. Two orderlies had just dismantled the electro-therapy unit and were wheeling the console away on a trolley. Outside in the gymnasium a quiet, urgent traffic of nurses and interns moved past. All but a single bank of arc-lights had been switched off, and the gymnasium seemed like a deserted stage at the end of a performance.

'I slipped into the office to pick up a few test cards,' he explained. 'I wasn't gone more than ten minutes.'

'You were supposed to watch them continuously,' Neill snapped. 'Not wander off by yourself whenever you felt like it. What do you think we had the gym and this entire circus set up for?'

It was a little after five thirty a.m. After working hopelessly on the three men for a couple of hours, he was close to exhaustion. He looked down at them, lying inertly in their cots, canvas sheets buckled up to their chins. They had barely changed, but their eyes were open and unblinking, and their faces had the empty, reflexless look of psychic zero.

An intern bent over Lang, thumbing a hypodermic. Morley stared at the floor. 'I think they would have gone anyway.'

'How can you say that?' Neill clamped his lips together. He felt frustrated and impotent. He knew Morley was probably right – the three men were in terminal withdrawal, unresponsive to either insulin or electrotherapy, and a vice-tight catatonic seizure didn't close in out of nowhere – but as always refused to admit anything without absolute proof.

He led the way into his office and shut the door.

'Sit down.' He pulled a chair out for Morley and prowled off round the room, slamming a fist into his palm.

'All right, John. What is it?'

Morley picked up one of the test cards lying on the desk, balanced it on a corner and spun it between his fingers. Phrases swam through his mind, tentative and uncertain, like blind fish.

'What do you want me to say?' he asked. 'Reactivation of the infantile imago? A regression into the great, slumbering womb? Or to put it more simply still – just a fit of pique?'

'Go on.'

Morley shrugged. 'Continual consciousness is more than the brain can stand. Any signal repeated often enough eventually loses its meaning. Try saying the word "sleep" fifty times. After a point the brain's self-awareness dulls. It's no longer able to grasp who or why it is, and it rides adrift.'

'What do we do then?'

'Nothing. Short of re-scoring all the way down to Lumbar 1. The central nervous system can't stand narcotomy.'

Neill shook his head. 'You're lost,' he said curtly. 'Juggling with generalities isn't going to bring those men back. First, we've got to find

out what happened to them, what they actually felt and saw.'

Morley frowned dubiously. 'That jungle is marked "private". Even if you do, is a psychotic's withdrawal drama going to make any sense?'

'Of course it will. However insane it seems to us, it was real enough to them. If we know the ceiling fell in or the whole gym filled with ice-cream or turned into a maze, we've got something to work on.' He sat down on the desk. 'Do you remember that story of Chekov's you told me about?'

'"The Bet"? Yes.'

'I read it last night. Curious. It's a lot nearer what you're really trying to say than you know.' He gazed round the office. 'This room in which the man is penned for ten years symbolizes the mind driven to the furthest limits of self-awareness . . . Something very similar happened to Avery, Gorrell and Lang. They must have reached a stage beyond which they could no longer contain the idea of their own identity. But far from being unable to grasp the idea, I'd say that they were conscious of nothing else. Like the man in the spherical mirror, who can only see a single gigantic eye staring back at him.'

'So you think their withdrawal is a straightforward escape from the eye, the overwhelming ego?'

'Not escape,' Neill corrected. 'The psychotic never escapes from anything. He's much more sensible. He merely readjusts reality to suit himself. Quite a trick to learn, too. The room in Chekov's story gives me an idea as to how they might have re-adjusted. Their particular equivalent of this room was the gym. I'm beginning to realize it was a mistake to put them in there – all those lights blazing down, the huge floor, high walls. They merely exaggerate the sensation of overload. In fact the gym might easily have become an external projection of their own egos.'

Neill drummed his fingers on the desk. 'My guess is that at this moment they're either striding around in there the size of hundred-foot giants, or else they've cut it down to their own dimensions. More probably that. They've just pulled the gym in on themselves.'

Morley grinned bleakly. 'So all we've got to do now is pump them full of honey and apomorphine and coax them out. Suppose they refuse?'

'They won't,' Neill said. 'You'll see.'

There was a rap on the door. An intern stuck his head through.

'Lang's coming out of it, Doctor. He's calling for you.'

Neill bounded out.

Morley followed him into the ward.

Lang was lying in his cot, body motionless under the canvas sheet. His lips were parted slightly. No sound came from them but Morley, bending over next to Neill, could see his hyoid bone vibrating in spasms.

'He's very faint,' the intern warned.

Neill pulled up a chair and sat down next to the cot. He made a visible effort of concentration, flexing his shoulders. He bent his head close to Lang's and listened.

Five minutes later it came through again.

Lang's lips quivered. His body arched under the sheet, straining at the buckles, and then subsided.

'Neill . . . Neill,' he whispered. The sounds, thin and strangled, seemed to be coming from the bottom of a well. 'Neill . . . Neill . . . Neill . . .'

Neill stroked his forehead with a small, neat hand.

'Yes, Bobby,' he said gently. His voice was feather-soft, caressing. 'I'm here, Bobby. You can come out now.'

1957

TRACK 12

'Guess again,' Sheringham said.

Maxted clipped on the headphones, carefully settled them over his ears. He concentrated as the disc began to spin, trying to catch some echo of identity.

The sound was a rapid metallic rustling, like iron filings splashing through a funnel. It ran for ten seconds, repeated itself a dozen times, then ended abruptly in a string of blips.

'Well?' Sheringham asked. 'What is it?'

Maxted pulled off his headphones, rubbed one of his ears. He had been listening to the records for hours and his ears felt bruised and numb.

'Could be anything. An ice-cube melting?'

Sheringham shook his head, his little beard wagging.

Maxted shrugged. 'A couple of galaxies colliding?'

'No. Sound waves don't travel through space. I'll give you a clue. It's one of those *proverbial* sounds.' He seemed to be enjoying the catechism.

Maxted lit a cigarette, threw the match onto the laboratory bench. The head melted a tiny pool of wax, froze and left a shallow black scar. He watched it pleasurably, conscious of Sheringham fidgeting beside him.

He pumped his brains for an obscene simile. 'What about a fly –'

'Time's up,' Sheringham cut in. '*A pin dropping.*' He took the 3-inch disc off the player, angled it into its sleeve.

'In actual fall, that is, not impact. We used a fifty-foot shaft and eight microphones. I thought you'd get that one.'

He reached for the last record, a 12-inch LP, but Maxted stood up before he got it to the turntable. Through the french windows he could see the patio, a table, glasses and decanter gleaming in the darkness. Sheringham and his infantile games suddenly irritated him; he felt impatient with himself for tolerating the man so long.

'Let's get some air,' he said brusquely, shouldering past one of the amplifier rigs. 'My ears feel like gongs.'

'By all means,' Sheringham agreed promptly. He placed the record carefully on the turntable and switched off the player. 'I want to save this one until later anyway.'

They went out into the warm evening air. Sheringham turned on the Japanese lanterns and they stretched back in the wicker chairs under the open sky.

'I hope you weren't too bored,' Sheringham said as he handled the decanter. 'Microsonics is a fascinating hobby, but I'm afraid I may have let it become an obsession.'

Maxted grunted non-committally. 'Some of the records are interesting,' he admitted. 'They have a sort of crazy novelty value, like blown-up photographs of moths' faces and razor blades. Despite what you claim, though, I can't believe microsonics will ever become a scientific tool. It's just an elaborate laboratory toy.'

Sheringham shook his head. 'You're completely wrong, of course. Remember the cell division series I played first of all? Amplified 100,000 times animal cell division sounds like a lot of girders and steel sheets being ripped apart – how did you put it? – a car smash in slow motion. On the other hand, plant cell division is an electronic poem, all soft chords and bubbling tones. Now there you have a perfect illustration of how microsonics can reveal the distinction between the animal and plant kingdoms.'

'Seems a damned roundabout way of doing it,' Maxted commented, helping himself to soda. 'You might as well calculate the speed of your car from the apparent motion of the stars. Possible, but it's easier to look at the speedometer.'

Sheringham nodded, watching Maxted closely across the table. His interest in the conversation appeared to have exhausted itself, and the two men sat silently with their glasses. Strangely, the hostility between them, of so many years' standing, now became less veiled, the contrast of personality, manner and physique more pronounced. Maxted, a tall fleshy man with a coarse handsome face, lounged back almost horizontally in his chair, thinking about Susan Sheringham. She was at the Turnbulls' party, and but for the fact that it was no longer discreet of him to be seen at the Turnbulls' – for the all-too-familiar reason – he would have passed the evening with her, rather than with her grotesque little husband.

He surveyed Sheringham with as much detachment as he could muster, wondering whether this prim unattractive man, with his pedantry and in-bred academic humour, had any redeeming qualities whatever. None, certainly, at a casual glance, though it required some courage and pride to have invited him round that evening. His motives, however, would be typically eccentric.

The pretext, Maxted reflected, had been slight enough – Sheringham, professor of biochemistry at the university, maintained a lavish home laboratory; Maxted, a run-down athlete with a bad degree, acted as torpedo-man for a company manufacturing electron microscopes; a visit, Sheringham had suggested over the phone, might be to the profit of both.

Of course, nothing of this had in fact been mentioned. But nor, as yet, had he referred to Susan, the real subject of the evening's charade. Maxted speculated upon the possible routes Sheringham might take towards the inevitable confrontation scene; not for him the nervous circular pacing,

the well-thumbed photostat, or the tug at the shoulder. There was a vicious adolescent streak running through Sheringham –

Maxted broke out of his reverie abruptly. The air in the patio had become suddenly cooler, almost as if a powerful refrigerating unit had been switched on. A rash of goose-flesh raced up his thighs and down the back of his neck, and he reached forward and finished what was left of his whisky.

'Cold out here,' he commented.

Sheringham glanced at his watch. 'Is it?' he said. There was a hint of indecision in his voice; for a moment he seemed to be waiting for a signal. Then he pulled himself together and, with an odd half-smile, said: 'Time for the last record.'

'What do you mean?' Maxted asked.

'Don't move,' Sheringham said. He stood up. 'I'll put it on.' He pointed to a loudspeaker screwed to the wall above Maxted's head, grinned and ducked out.

Shivering uncomfortably, Maxted peered up into the silent evening sky, hoping that the vertical current of cold air that had sliced down into the patio would soon dissipate itself.

A low noise crackled from the speaker, multiplied by a circle of other speakers which he noticed for the first time had been slung among the trellis-work around the patio.

Shaking his head sadly at Sheringham's antics, he decided to help himself to more whisky. As he stretched across the table he swayed and rolled back uncontrollably into his chair. His stomach seemed to be full of mercury, ice-cold and enormously heavy. He pushed himself forward again, trying to reach the glass, and knocked it across the table. His brain began to fade, and he leaned his elbows helplessly on the glass edge of the table and felt his head fall onto his wrists.

When he looked up again Sheringham was standing in front of him, smiling sympathetically.

'Not too good, eh?' he said.

Breathing with difficulty, Maxted managed to lean back. He tried to speak to Sheringham, but he could no longer remember any words. His heart switchbacked, and he grimaced at the pain.

'Don't worry,' Sheringham assured him. 'The fibrillation is only a side effect. Disconcerting, perhaps, but it will soon pass.'

He strolled leisurely around the patio, scrutinizing Maxted from several angles. Evidently satisfied, he sat down on the table. He picked up the siphon and swirled the contents about. 'Chromium cyanate. Inhibits the coenzyme system controlling the body's fluid balances, floods hydroxyl ions into the bloodstream. In brief, you drown. Really drown, that is, not merely suffocate as you would if you were immersed in an external bath. However, I mustn't distract you.'

He inclined his head at the speakers. Being fed into the patio was a curiously muffled spongy noise, like elastic waves lapping in a latex

sea. The rhythms were huge and ungainly, overlaid by the deep leaden wheezing of a gigantic bellows. Barely audible at first, the sounds rose until they filled the patio and shut out the few traffic noises along the highway.

'Fantastic, isn't it?' Sheringham said. Twirling the siphon by its neck he stepped over Maxted's legs and adjusted the tone control under one of the speaker boxes. He looked blithe and spruce, almost ten years younger. 'These are 30-second repeats, 400 microsens, amplification one thousand. I admit I've edited the track a little, but it's still remarkable how repulsive a beautiful sound can become. You'll never guess what this was.'

Maxted stirred sluggishly. The lake of mercury in his stomach was as cold and bottomless as an oceanic trench, and his arms and legs had become enormous, like the bloated appendages of a drowned giant. He could just see Sheringham bobbing about in front of him, and hear the slow beating of the sea in the distance. Nearer now, it pounded with a dull insistent rhythm, the great waves ballooning and bursting like bubbles in a lava sea.

'I'll tell you, Maxted, it took me a year to get that recording,' Sheringham was saying. He straddled Maxted, gesturing with the siphon. 'A year. Do you know how ugly a year can be?' For a moment he paused, then tore himself from the memory. 'Last Saturday, just after midnight, you and Susan were lying back in this same chair. You know, Maxted, there are audio-probes everywhere here. Slim as pencils, with a six-inch focus. I had four in that headrest alone.' He added, as a footnote: 'The wind is your own breathing, fairly heavy at the time, if I remember; your interlocked pulses produced the thunder effect.'

Maxted drifted in a wash of sound.

Some while later Sheringham's face filled his eyes, beard wagging, mouth working wildly.

'Maxted! You've only two more guesses, so for God's sake concentrate,' he shouted irritably, his voice almost lost among the thunder rolling from the sea. 'Come on, man, what is it? Maxted!' he bellowed. He leapt for the nearest loudspeaker and drove up the volume. The sound boomed out of the patio, reverberating into the night.

Maxted had almost gone now, his fading identity a small featureless island nearly eroded by the waves beating across it.

Sheringham knelt down and shouted into his ear.

'Maxted, can you hear the sea? Do you know where you're drowning?'

A succession of gigantic flaccid waves, each more lumbering and enveloping than the last, rode down upon them.

'In a kiss!' Sheringham screamed. 'A kiss!'

The island slipped and slid away into the molten shelf of the sea.

1958

THE WAITING GROUNDS

Whether Henry Tallis, my predecessor at Murak Radio Observatory, knew about the Waiting Grounds I can't say. On the whole it seems obvious he must have done, and that the three weeks he spent handing the station over to me – a job which could easily have been done in three days – were merely to give him sufficient time to decide whether or not to tell me about them. Certainly he never did, and the implied judgment against me is one I haven't yet faced up to.

I remember that on the first evening after my arrival at Murak he asked me a question I've been puzzling over ever since.

We were up on the lounge deck of the observatory, looking out at the sand-reefs and fossil cones of the volcano jungle glowing in the false dusk, the great 250-foot steel bowl of the telescope humming faintly in the air above us.

'Tell me, Quaine,' Tallis suddenly asked, 'where would you like to be when the world ends?'

'I haven't really thought about it,' I admitted. 'Is there any urgency?'

'Urgency?' Tallis smiled at me thinly, his eyes amiable but assessing me shrewdly. 'Wait until you've been here a little longer.'

He had almost finished his last tour at the observatory and I assumed he was referring to the desolation around us which he, after fifteen years, was leaving thanklessly to my entire care. Later, of course, I realized how wrong I was, just as I misjudged the whole of Tallis's closed, complex personality.

He was a lean, ascetic-looking man of about fifty, withheld and moody, as I discovered the moment I debarked from the freighter flying me in to Murak – instead of greeting me at the ramp he sat in the half-track a hundred yards away at the edge of the port, watching silently through dark glasses as I heaved my suitcases across the burning, lava-thick sunlight, legs weary after the massive deceleration, stumbling in the unfamiliar gravity.

The gesture seemed characteristic. Tallis's manner was aloof and sardonic; everything he said had the same deliberately ambiguous overtones, that air of private mystery recluses and extreme introjects assume as a defence. Not that Tallis was in any way pathological – no one could spend fifteen years, even with six-monthly leaves, virtually alone on a remote planetary clinker like Murak without developing a few curious mannerisms. In fact, as I all too soon realized, what was really remarkable

about Tallis was the degree to which he had preserved his sanity, not surrendered it.

He listened keenly to the latest news from Earth.

'The first pilotless launchings to Proxima Centauri are scheduled for 2250 . . . the UN Assembly at Lake Success have just declared themselves a sovereign state . . . V-R Day celebrations are to be discontinued – you must have heard it all on the radiocasts.'

'I haven't got a radio here,' Tallis said. 'Apart from the one up there, and that's tuned to the big spiral networks in Andromeda. On Murak we listen only to the important news.'

I nearly retorted that by the time it reached Murak the news, however important, would be a million years old, but on that first evening I was preoccupied with adjusting myself to an unfamiliar planetary environment – notably a denser atmosphere, slightly higher (1.2 E) gravity, vicious temperature swings from –30° to +160° – and programming new routines to fit myself into Murak's 18-hour day.

Above all, there was the prospect of two years of near-absolute isolation.

Ten miles from Murak Reef, the planet's only settlement, the observatory was sited among the first hills marking the northern edge of the inert volcano jungle which spread southward to Murak's equator. It consisted of the giant telescope and a straggling nexus of twenty or thirty asbestos domes which housed the automatic data processing and tracking units, generator and refrigerating plant, and a miscellany of replacement and vehicle stores, workshops and ancillary equipment.

The observatory was self-sufficient as regards electric power and water. On the near-by slopes farms of solar batteries had been planted out in quarter-mile strips, the thousands of cells winking in the sunlight like a field of diamonds, sucking power from the sun to drive the generator dynamos. On another slope, its huge mouth permanently locked into the rock face, a mobile water synthesizer slowly bored its way through the desert crust, mining out oxygen and hydrogen combined into the surface minerals.

'You'll have plenty of spare time on your hands,' the Deputy Director of the Astrographic Institute on Ceres had warned me when I initialled the contract. 'There's a certain amount of routine maintenance, checking the power feeds to the reflector traverses and the processing units, but otherwise you won't need to touch the telescope. A big digital does the heavy thinking, tapes all the data down in 2000-hour schedules. You fly the cans out with you when you go on leave.'

'So apart from shovelling the sand off the doorstep there's virtually nothing for me to do?' I'd commented.

'That's what you're being paid for. Probably not as much as you deserve. Two years will seem a long time, even with three leave intervals. But don't

worry about going crazy. You aren't alone on Murak. You'll just be bored. £2000 worth, to be exact. However, you say you have a thesis to write. And you never know, you may like it there. Tallis, the observer you're taking over from, went out in '03 for two years like yourself, and stayed fifteen. He'll show you the ropes. Pleasant fellow, by all accounts, a little whimsical, probably try to pull your leg.'

Tallis drove me down to the settlement the first morning to collect my heavy vacuum baggage that had travelled spacehold.

'Murak Reef,' he pointed out as the old '95 Chrysler half-track churned through the thick luminous ash silted over the metal road. We crossed a system of ancient lava lakes, flat grey disks half a mile wide, their hard crusts blistered and pocked by the countless meteor showers that had driven into Murak during the past million years. In the distance a group of long flat-roofed sheds and three high ore elevators separated themselves from the landscape.

'I suppose they warned you. One supplies depot, a radio terminal and the minerals concession. Latest reliable estimates put the total population at seven.'

I stared out at the surrounding desert floor, cracked and tiered by the heat swings into what looked like huge plates of rusted iron, and at the massed cones of the volcano jungle yellowing in the sand haze. It was 4 o'clock local time – early morning – but the temperature was already over 80°. We drove with windows shuttered, sun curtain down, refrigerating unit pumping noisily.

'Must be fun on Saturday night,' I commented. 'Isn't there anything else?'

'Just the thermal storms, and a mean noon temperature of 160°.'

'In the shade?'

Tallis laughed. 'Shade? You must have a sense of humour. There isn't any shade on Murak. Don't ever forget it. Half an hour before noon the temperature starts to go up two degrees a minute. If you're caught out in it you'll be putting a match to your own pyre.'

Murak Reef was a dust hole. In the sheds backing onto the depot the huge ore crushers and conveyors of the extraction plants clanked and slammed. Tallis introduced me to the agent, a morose old man called Pickford, and to two young engineers taking the wraps off a new grader. No one made any attempt at small talk. We nodded briefly, loaded my luggage onto the half-track and left.

'A taciturn bunch,' I said. 'What are they mining?'

'Tantalum, Columbium, the Rare Earths. A heartbreaking job, the concentrations are barely workable. They're tempted to Murak by fabulous commission rates, but they're lucky if they can even fill their norms.'

'You can't be sorry you're leaving. What made you stay here fifteen years?'

'It would take me fifteen years to tell you,' Tallis rejoined. 'I like the empty hills and the dead lakes.'

I murmured some comment, and aware that I wasn't satisfied he suddenly scooped a handful of grey sand off the seat, held it up and let it sift away through his fingers. 'Prime archezoic loam. Pure bedrock. Spit on it and anything might happen. Perhaps you'll understand me if I say I've been waiting for it to rain.'

'Will it?'

Tallis nodded. 'In about two million years, so someone who came here told me.'

He said it with complete seriousness.

During the next few days, as we checked the stores and equipment inventories and ran over the installation together, I began to wonder if Tallis had lost his sense of time. Most men left to themselves for an indefinite period develop some occupational interest: chess or an insoluble dream-game or merely a compulsive wood-whittling. But Tallis, as far as I could see, did nothing. The cabin, a three-storey drum built round a central refrigerating column, was spartan and comfortless. Tallis's only recreation seemed to be staring out at the volcano jungle. This was an almost obsessive activity – all evening and most of the afternoon he would sit up on the lounge deck, gazing out at the hundreds of extinct cones visible from the observatory, their colours running the spectrum from red to violet as the day swung round into night.

The first indication of what Tallis was watching for came about a week before he was due to leave. He had crated up his few possessions and we were clearing out one of the small storage domes near the telescope. In the darkness at the back, draped across a pile of old fans, track links and beer coolers, were two pedal-powered refrigerator suits, enormous unwieldy sacks equipped with chest pylons and hand-operated cycle gears.

'Do you ever have to use these?' I asked Tallis, glumly visualizing what a generator failure could mean.

He shook his head. 'They were left behind by a survey team which did some work out in the volcanoes. There's an entire camp lying around in these sheds, in case you ever feel like a weekend on safari.'

Tallis was by the door. I moved my flashlight away and was about to switch it off when something flickered up at me from the floor. I stepped over the debris, searched about and found a small circular aluminium chest, about two feet across by a foot deep. Mounted on the back was a battery pack, thermostat and temperature selector. It was a typical relic of an expensively mounted expedition, probably a cocktail cabinet or hat box. Embossed in heavy gold lettering on the lid were the initials 'C.F.N.'

Tallis came over from the door.

'What's this?' he asked sharply, adding his flash to mine.

I would have left the case where it lay, but there was something in Tallis's voice, a distinct inflection of annoyance, that made me pick it up and shoulder past into the sunlight.

I cleaned off the dust, Tallis at my shoulder. Keying open the vacuum

seals I sprung back the lid. Inside was a small tape recorder, spool racks and a telescopic boom mike that cantilevered three feet up into the air, hovering a few inches from my mouth. It was a magnificent piece of equipment, a single-order job hand-made by a specialist, worth at least £500 apart from the case.

'Beautifully tooled,' I remarked to Tallis. I tipped the platform and watched it spring gently. 'The air bath is still intact.'

I ran my fingers over the range indicator and the selective six-channel reading head. It was even fitted with a sonic trip, a useful device which could be set to trigger at anything from a fly's foot-fall to a walking crane's.

The trip had been set; I wondered what might have strayed across it when I saw that someone had anticipated me. The tape between the spools had been ripped out, so roughly that one spool had been torn off its bearings. The rack was empty, and the two frayed tabs hooked to the spool axles were the only pieces of tape left.

'Somebody was in a hurry,' I said aloud. I depressed the lid and polished the initials with my fingertips. 'This must have belonged to one of the members of the survey. *C. F. N.* Do you want to send it on to him?'

Tallis watched me pensively. 'No. I'm afraid the two members of the team died here. Just over a year ago.'

He told me about the incident. Two Cambridge geologists had negotiated through the Institute for Tallis's help in establishing a camp ten miles out in the volcano jungle, where they intended to work for a year, analysing the planet's core materials. The cost of bringing a vehicle to Murak was prohibitive, so Tallis had transported all the equipment to the camp site and set it up for them.

'I arranged to visit them once a month with power packs, water and supplies. The first time everything seemed all right. They were both over sixty, but standing up well to the heat. The camp and laboratory were running smoothly, and they had a small transmitter they could have used in an emergency.

'I saw them three times altogether. On my fourth visit they had vanished. I estimated that they'd been missing for about a week. Nothing was wrong. The transmitter was working, and there was plenty of water and power. I assumed they'd gone out collecting samples, lost themselves and died quickly in the first noon high.'

'You never found the bodies?'

'No. I searched for them, but in the volcano jungle the contours of the valley floors shift from hour to hour. I notified the Institute and two months later an inspector flew in from Ceres and drove out to the site with me. He certified the deaths, told me to dismantle the camp and store it here. There were a few personal things, but I've heard nothing from any friends or relatives.'

'Tragic,' I commented. I closed the tape recorder and carried it into

the shed. We walked back to the cabin. It was an hour to noon, and the parabolic sun bumper over the roof was a bowl of liquid fire.

I said to Tallis: 'What on earth were they hoping to catch in the volcano jungle? The sonic trip was set.'

'Was it?' Tallis shrugged. 'What are you suggesting?'

'Nothing. It's just curious. I'm surprised there wasn't more of an investigation.'

'Why? To start with, the fare from Ceres is £800, over £3000 from Earth. They were working privately. Why should anyone waste time and money doubting the obvious?'

I wanted to press Tallis for detail, but his last remark seemed to close the episode. We ate a silent lunch, then went out on a tour of the solar farms, replacing burnt-out thermo-couples. I was left with a vanished tape, two deaths, and a silent teasing suspicion that linked them neatly together.

Over the next days I began to watch Tallis more closely, waiting for another clue to the enigma growing around him.

I did learn one thing that astonished me.

I had asked him about his plans for the future; these were indefinite – he said something vague about a holiday, nothing he anticipated with any eagerness, and sounded as if he had given no thought whatever to his retirement. Over the last few days, as his departure time drew closer, the entire focus of his mind became fixed upon the volcano jungle; from dawn until late into the night he sat quietly in his chair, staring out at the ghostless panorama of disintegrating cones, adrift in some private time sea.

'When are you coming back?' I asked with an attempt at playfulness, curious why he was leaving Murak at all.

He took the question seriously. 'I'm afraid I won't be. Fifteen years is long enough, just about the limit of time one can spend continuously in a single place. After that one gets institutionalized –'

'Continuously?' I broke in. 'You've had your leaves?'

'No, I didn't bother. I was busy here.'

'Fifteen years!' I shouted. 'Good God, why? In this of all places! And what do you mean, "busy"? You're just sitting here, waiting for nothing. What are you supposed to be watching for, anyway?'

Tallis smiled evasively, started to say something and then thought better of it.

The question pressed round him. What *was* he waiting for? Were the geologists still alive? Was he expecting them to return, or make some signal? As I watched him pace about the cabin on his last morning I was convinced there was something he couldn't quite bring himself to tell me. Almost melodramatically he watched out over the desert, delaying his departure until the thirty-minute take-off siren hooted from the port. As we climbed into the half-track I fully expected the glowing spectres of

the two geologists to come looming out of the volcano jungle, uttering cries of murder and revenge.

He shook my hand carefully before he went aboard. 'You've got my address all right? You're quite sure?' For some reason, which confused my cruder suspicions, he had made a special point of ensuring that both I and the Institute would be able to contact him.

'Don't worry,' I said. 'I'll let you know if it rains.'

He looked at me sombrely. 'Don't wait too long.' His eyes strayed past my head towards the southern horizon, through the sand-haze to the endless sea of cones. He added: 'Two million years is a long time.'

I took his arm as we walked to the ramp. 'Tallis,' I asked quietly, 'what are you watching for? There's something, isn't there?'

He pulled away from me, collected himself. 'What?' he said shortly, looking at his wristwatch.

'You've been trying to tell me all week,' I insisted. 'Come on, man.'

He shook his head abruptly, muttered something about the heat and stepped quickly through the lock.

I started to shout after him: 'Those two geologists are out there . . . !' but the five-minute siren shattered the air and by the time it stopped Tallis had disappeared down the companionway and crewmen were shackling on the launching gantry and sealing the cargo and passenger locks.

I stood at the edge of the port as the ship cleared its take-off check, annoyed with myself for waiting until the last impossible moment to press Tallis for an explanation. Half an hour later he was gone.

Over the next few days Tallis began to slide slowly into the back of my mind. I gradually settled into the observatory, picked out new routines to keep time continuously on the move. Mayer, the metallurgist down at the mine, came over to the cabin most evenings to play chess and forget his pitifully low extraction rates. He was a big, muscular fellow of thirty-five who loathed Murak's climate, geology and bad company, a little crude but the sort of tonic I needed after an overdose of Tallis.

Mayer had met Tallis only once, and had never heard about the deaths of the two geologists.

'Damned fools, what were they looking for? Nothing to do with geology, Murak hasn't got one.'

Pickford, the old agent down at the depot, was the only person on Murak who remembered the two men, but time had garbled his memories.

'Salesmen, they were,' he told me, blowing into his pipe. 'Tallis did the heavy work for them. Should never have come here, trying to sell all those books.'

'Books?'

'Cases full. Bibles, if I recall.'

'Textbooks,' I suggested. 'Did you see them?'

'Sure I did,' he said, puttering to himself. 'Guinea moroccos.' He jerked his head sharply. 'You won't sell them here, I told them.'

It sounded exactly like a dry piece of academic humour. I could see Tallis and the two scientists pulling Pickford's leg, passing off their reference library as a set of commercial samples.

I suppose the whole episode would eventually have faded, but Tallis's charts kept my interest going. There were about twenty of them, half million aerials of the volcano jungle within a fifteen-mile radius of the observatory. One of them was marked with what I assumed to be the camp site of the geologists and alternative routes to and from the observatory. The camp was just over ten miles away, across terrain that was rough but not over-difficult for a tracked car.

I still suspected I was getting myself wound up over nothing. A meaningless approach arrow on the charts, the faintest suggestion of a cryptic 'X', and I should have been off like a rocket after a geldspar mine or two mysterious graves. I was almost sure that Tallis had not been responsible, either by negligence or design, for the deaths of the two men, but that still left a number of unanswered questions.

The next clear day I checked over the half-track, strapped a flare pistol into my knee holster and set off, warning Pickford to listen out for a mayday call on the Chrysler's transmitter.

It was just after dawn when I gunned the half-track out of the observatory compound and headed up the slope between two battery farms, following the route mapped out on the charts. Behind me the telescope swung slowly on its bogies, tirelessly sweeping its great steel ear through the Cepheid talk. The temperature was in the low seventies, comfortably cool for Murak, the sky a fresh cerise, broken by lanes of indigo that threw vivid violet lights on the drifts of grey ash on the higher slopes of the volcano jungle.

The observatory soon fell behind, obscured by the exhaust dust. I passed the water synthesizer, safely pointed at ten thousand tons of silicon hydrate, and within twenty minutes reached the nearest cone, a white broad-backed giant two hundred feet high, and drove round it into the first valley. Fifty feet across at their summits, the volcanoes jostled together like a herd of enormous elephants, separated by narrow dust-filled valleys, sometimes no more than a hundred yards apart, here and there giving way to the flat mile-long deck of a fossil lava lake. Wherever possible the route took advantage of these, and I soon picked up the tracks left by the Chrysler on its trips a year earlier.

I reached the site in three hours. What was left of the camp stood on a beach overlooking one of the lakes, a dismal collection of fuel cylinders, empty cold stores and water tanks sinking under the tides of dust washed up by the low thermal winds. On the far side of the lake the violet-capped cones of the volcanoes ranged southwards. Behind, a crescent of sharp cliffs cut off half the sky.

I walked round the site, looking for some trace of the two geologists. A battered tin field-desk lay on its side, green paint blistered and scratched. I turned it over and pulled out its drawers, finding nothing except a charred notebook and a telephone, the receiver melted solidly into its cradle.

Tallis had done his job too well.

The temperature was over 100° by the time I climbed back into the half-track and a couple of miles ahead I had to stop as the cooling unit was draining power from the spark plugs and stalling the engine. The outside temperature was 130°, the sky a roaring shield, reflected in the slopes around me so that they seemed to stream with molten wax. I sealed all the shutters and changed into neutral, even then having to race the ancient engine to provide enough current for the cooler. I sat there for over an hour in the dim gloom of the dashboard, ears deadened by the engine roar, right foot cramping, cursing Tallis and the two geologists.

That evening I unfurled some crisp new vellum, flexed my slide rule and determined to start work on my thesis.

One afternoon, two or three months later, as we turned the board between chess games, Mayer remarked: 'I saw Pickford this morning. He told me he had some samples to show you.'

'TV tapes?'

'Bibles, I thought he said.'

I looked in on Pickford the next time I was down at the settlement. He was hovering about in the shadows behind the counter, white suit dirty and unpressed.

He puffed smoke at me. 'Those salesmen,' he explained. 'You were inquiring about. I told you they were selling Bibles.'

I nodded. 'Well?'

'I kept some.'

I put out my cigarette. 'Can I see them?'

He gestured me round the counter with his pipe. 'In the back.'

I followed him between the shelves, loaded with fans, radios and TV-scopes, all outdated models imported years earlier to satisfy the boom planet Murak had never become.

'There it is,' Pickford said. Standing against the back wall of the depot was a three-by-three wooden crate, taped with metal bands. Pickford ferreted about for a wrench. 'Thought you might like to buy some.'

'How long has it been here?'

'About a year. Tallis forgot to collect it. Only found it last week.'

Doubtful, I thought: more likely he was simply waiting for Tallis to be safely out of the way. I watched while he prised off the lid. Inside was a tough brown wrapping paper. Pickford broke the seals and folded the sides back carefully, revealing a layer of black morocco-bound volumes.

I pulled out one of them and held the heavily ribbed spine up to the light.

It was a Bible, as Pickford had promised. Below it were a dozen others.

'You're right,' I said. Pickford pulled up a radiogram and sat down, watching me.

I looked at the Bible again. It was in mint condition, the King James Authorized Version. The marbling inside the endboards was unmarked. A publisher's ticket slipped out onto the floor, and I realized that the copy had hardly come from a private library.

The bindings varied slightly. The next volume I pulled out was a copy of the Vulgate.

'How many crates did they have altogether?' I asked Pickford.

'Bibles? Fourteen, fifteen with this one. They ordered them all after they got here. This was the last one.' He pulled out another volume and handed it to me. 'Good condition, eh?'

It was a Koran.

I started lifting the volumes out and got Pickford to help me sort them on the shelves. When we counted them up there were ninety in all: thirty-five Holy Bibles (twenty-four Authorized Versions and eleven Vulgates), fifteen copies of the Koran, five of the Talmud, ten of the Bhagavat Gita and twenty-five of the Upanishads.

I took one of each and gave Pickford a £10 note.

'Any time you want some more,' he called after me. 'Maybe I can arrange a discount.' He was chuckling to himself, highly pleased with the deal, one up on the salesmen.

When Mayer called round that evening he noticed the six volumes on my desk.

'Pickford's samples,' I explained. I told him how I had found the crate at the depot and that it had been ordered by the geologists after their arrival. 'According to Pickford they ordered a total of fifteen crates. All Bibles.'

'He's senile.'

'No. His memory is good. There were certainly other crates because this one was sealed and he knew it contained Bibles.'

'Damned funny. Maybe they were salesmen.'

'Whatever they were they certainly weren't geologists. Why did Tallis say they were? Anyway, why didn't he ever mention that they had ordered all these Bibles?'

'Perhaps he'd forgotten.'

'Fifteen crates? Fifteen crates of Bibles? Heavens above, what did they do with them?'

Mayer shrugged. He went over to the window. 'Do you want me to radio Ceres?'

'Not yet. It still doesn't add up to anything.'

'There might be a reward. Probably a big one. God, I could go home!'

'Relax. First we've got to find out what these so-called geologists were doing here, why they ordered this fantastic supply of Bibles. One thing: whatever it was, I swear Tallis knew about it. Originally I thought they

might have discovered a geldspar mine and been double-crossed by Tallis – that sonic trip was suspicious. Or else that they'd deliberately faked their own deaths so that they could spend a couple of years working the mine, using Tallis as their supply source. But all these Bibles mean we must start thinking in completely different categories.'

Round the clock for three days, with only short breaks for sleep hunched in the Chrysler's driving seat, I systematically swept the volcano jungle, winding slowly through the labyrinth of valleys, climbing to the crest of every cone, carefully checking every exposed quartz vein, every rift or gulley that might hide what I was convinced was waiting for me.

Mayer deputized at the observatory, driving over every afternoon. He helped me recondition an old diesel generator in one of the storage domes and we lashed it on to the back of the half-track to power the cabin heater needed for the –30° nights and the three big spotlights fixed on the roof, providing a 360° traverse. I made two trips with a full cargo of fuel out to the camp site, dumped them there and made it my base.

Across the thick glue-like sand of the volcano jungle, we calculated, a man of sixty could walk at a maximum of one mile an hour, and spend at most two hours in 70° or above sunlight. That meant that whatever there was to find would be within twelve square miles of the camp site, three square miles if we included a return journey.

I searched the volcanoes as exactingly as I could, marking each cone and the adjacent valleys on the charts as I covered them, at a steady five miles an hour, the great engine of the Chrysler roaring ceaselessly, from noon, when the valleys filled with fire and seemed to run with lava again, round to midnight, when the huge cones became enormous mountains of bone, sombre graveyards presided over by the fantastic colonnades and hanging galleries of the sand reefs, suspended from the lake rims like inverted cathedrals.

I forced the Chrysler on, swinging the bumpers to uproot any suspicious crag or boulder that might hide a mine shaft, ramming through huge drifts of fine white sand that rose in soft clouds around the half-track like the dust of powdered silk.

I found nothing. The reefs and valleys were deserted, the volcano slopes untracked, craters empty, their shallow floors littered with meteor debris, rock sulphur and cosmic dust.

I decided to give up just before dawn on the fourth morning, after waking from a couple of hours of cramped and restless sleep.

'I'm coming in now,' I reported to Mayer over the transmitter. 'There's nothing out here. I'll collect what fuel there is left from the site and see you for breakfast.'

Dawn had just come up as I reached the site. I loaded the fuel cans back onto the half-track, switched off the spotlights and took what I knew would be my last look round. I sat down at the field desk and watched the sun arching upward through the cones across the

lake. Scooping a handful of ash off the desk, I scrutinized it sadly for geldspar.

'Prime archezoic loam,' I said, repeating Tallis's words aloud to the dead lake. I was about to spit on it, more in anger than in hope, when some of the tumblers in my mind started to click.

About five miles from the far edge of the lake, silhouetted against the sunrise over the volcanoes, was a long 100-foot-high escarpment of hard slate-blue rock that lifted out of the desert bed and ran for about two miles in a low clean sweep across the horizon, disappearing among the cones in the south-west. Its outlines were sharp and well defined, suggesting that its materials pre-dated the planet's volcanic period. The escarpment sat squarely across the desert, gaunt and rigid, and looked as if it had been there since Murak's beginning, while the soft ashy cones and grey hillocks around it had known only the planet's end.

It was no more than an uninformed guess, but suddenly I would have bet my entire two years' salary that the rocks of the escarpment were archezoic. It was about three miles outside the area I had been combing, just visible from the observatory.

The vision of a geldspar mine returned sharply!

The lake took me nearly halfway there. I raced the Chrysler across it at forty, wasted thirty minutes picking a route through an elaborate sand reef, and then entered a long steeply walled valley which led directly towards the escarpment.

A mile away I saw that the escarpment was not, as it first seemed, a narrow continuous ridge, but a circular horizontal table. A curious feature was the almost perfect flatness of the table top, as if it had been deliberately levelled by a giant sword. Its sides were unusually symmetrical; they sloped at exactly the same angle, about 35°, and formed a single cliff unbroken by fissures or crevices.

I reached the table in an hour, parked the half-track at its foot and looked up at the great rounded flank of dull blue rock sloping away from me, rising like an island out of the grey sea of the desert floor.

I changed down into bottom gear and floored the accelerator. Steering the Chrysler obliquely across the slope to minimize the angle of ascent, I roared slowly up the side, tracks skating and racing, swinging the half-track around like a frantic pendulum.

Scaling the crest, I levelled off and looked out over a plateau about two miles in diameter, bare except for a light blue carpet of cosmic dust.

In the centre of the plateau, at least a mile across, was an enormous metallic lake, heat ripples spiralling upwards from its dark smooth surface.

I edged the half-track forward, head out of the side window, watching carefully, holding down the speed that picked up too easily. There were no meteorites or rock fragments lying about; presumably the lake surface cooled and set at night, to melt and extend itself as the temperature rose the next day.

Although the roof seemed hard as steel I stopped about 300 yards from the edge, cut the engine and climbed up onto the cabin.

The shift of perspective was slight but sufficient. The lake vanished, and I realized I was looking down at a shallow basin, about half a mile wide, scooped out of the roof.

I swung back into the cab and slammed in the accelerator. The basin, like the table top, was a perfect circle, sloping smoothly to the floor about one hundred feet below its rim, in imitation of a volcanic crater.

I braked the half-track at the edge and jumped out.

Four hundred yards away, in the basin's centre, five gigantic rectangular slabs of stone reared up from a vast pentagonal base.

This, then, was the secret Tallis had kept from me.

The basin was empty, the air warmer, strangely silent after three days of the Chrysler's engine roaring inside my head.

I lowered myself over the edge and began to walk down the slope towards the great monument in the centre of the basin. For the first time since my arrival on Murak I was unable to see the desert and the brilliant colours of the volcano jungle. I had strayed into a pale blue world, as pure and exact as a geometric equation, composed of the curving floor, the pentagonal base and the five stone rectangles towering up into the sky like the temple of some abstract religion.

It took me nearly three minutes to reach the monument. Behind me, on the sky-line, the half-track's engine steamed faintly. I went up to the base stone, which was a yard thick and must have weighed over a thousand tons, and placed my palms on its surface. It was still cool, the thin blue grain closely packed. Like the megaliths standing on it, the pentagon was unornamented and geometrically perfect.

I heaved myself up and approached the nearest megalith. The shadows around me were enormous parallelograms, their angles shrinking as the sun blazed up into the sky. I walked slowly round into the centre of the group, dimly aware that neither Tallis nor the two geologists could have carved the megaliths and raised them onto the pentagon, when I saw that the entire inner surface of the nearest megalith was covered by row upon row of finely chiselled hieroglyphs.

Swinging round, I ran my hands across its surface. Large patches had crumbled away, leaving a faint indecipherable tracery, but most of the surface was intact, packed solidly with pictographic symbols and intricate cuneiform glyphics that ran down it in narrow columns.

I stepped over to the next megalith. Here again, the inner face was covered with tens of thousands of minute carved symbols, the rows separated by finely cut dividing rules that fell the full fifty-foot height of the megalith.

There were at least a dozen languages, all in alphabets I had never seen before, strings of meaningless ciphers among which I could pick odd

cross-hatched symbols that seemed to be numerals, and peculiar serpentine forms that might have represented human figures in stylized poses.

Suddenly my eye caught:

CYR*RK VII	A*PHA LEP**IS	*D 1317

Below was another, damaged but legible.

AMEN*TEK LC*V	*LPHA LE*ORIS	AD 13**

There were blanks among the letters, where time had flaked away minute grains of the stone.

My eyes raced down the column. There were a score more entries:

PONT*AR*H*CV	ALPH* L*PORIS	A* *318
MYR*K LV*	A**HA LEPORI*	AD 13*6
KYR** XII	ALPH* LEP*RIS	AD 1*19
.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....

The list of names, all from Alpha Leporis, continued down the column. I followed it to the base, where the names ended three inches from the bottom, then moved along the surface, across rows of hieroglyphs, and picked up the list three or four columns later.

M*MARYK XX*V	A*PHA LEPORI*	AD 1389
CYRARK IX	ALPHA *EPORIS	AD 1390
.....	.....	.....

I went over to the megalith on my left and began to examine the inscriptions carefully.

Here the entries read:

MINYS-259	DELT* ARGUS	AD 1874
TYLNYS-413	DELTA ARGUS	*D 1874
.....	.....	.....

There were fewer blanks; to the right of the face the entries were more recent, the lettering sharper. In all there were five distinct languages, four of them, including Earth's, translations of the first entry running down the left-hand margin of each column.

The third and fourth megaliths recorded entries from Gamma Grus and Beta Trianguli. They followed the same pattern, their surfaces divided into eighteen-inch-wide columns, each of which contained five rows of entries, the four hieroglyphic languages followed by Earth's, recording the same minimal data in the same terse formula: Name – Place – Date

I had looked at four of the megaliths. The fifth stood with its back to the sun, its inner face hidden.

I walked over to it, crossing the oblique panels of shadow withdrawing to their sources, curious as to what fabulous catalogue of names I should find.

The fifth megalith was blank.

My eyes raced across its huge unbroken surface, marked only by the quarter-inch-deep grooves of the dividing rules some thoughtful master mason from the stars had chiselled to tabulate the entries from Earth that had never come.

I returned to the other megaliths and for half an hour read at random, arms outstretched involuntarily across the great inscription panels, fingertips tracing the convolutions of the hieroglyphs, seeking among the thousands of signatures some clue to the identity and purpose of the four stellar races.

COPT*C LEAGUE MILV	BETA TRIANGULI	*D 1723
ISARI* LEAGUE *VII	BETA *RIANGULI	AD 1724
MAR-5-GO	GAMMA GRUS	AD 1959
VEN-7-GO	GAMMA GRUS	AD 1960
TETRARK XII	ALPHA LEPORIS	AD 2095

Dynasties recurred again and again, Cyrark's, Minys-'s, -Go's, separated by twenty- or thirty-year intervals that appeared to be generations. Before AD 1200 all entries were illegible. This represented something over half the total. The surfaces of the megaliths were almost completely covered, and initially I assumed that the first entries had been made roughly 2200 years earlier, shortly after the birth of Christ. However, the frequency of the entries increased algebraically: in the 15th century there were one or two a year, by the 20th century there were five or six, and by the present year the number varied from twenty entries from Delta Argus to over thirty-five from Alpha Leporis.

The last of these, at the extreme right corner of the megalith, was:

CYRARK CCCXXIV	ALPHA LEPORIS	AD 2218

The letters were freshly incised, perhaps no more than a day old, even a few hours. Below, a free space of two feet reached to the floor.

Breaking off my scrutiny, I jumped down from the base stone and carefully searched the surrounding basin, sweeping the light dust carpet for vehicle or foot marks, the remains of implements or scaffolding.

But the basin was empty, the dust untouched except for the single file of prints leading down from the half-track.

I was sweating uncomfortably, and the thermo-alarm strapped to my

wrist rang, warning me that the air temperature was 85°, ninety minutes to noon. I re-set it to 100°, took a last look round the five megaliths, and then made my way back to the half-track.

Heat waves raced and glimmered round the rim of the basin, and the sky was a dark inflamed red, mottled by the thermal pressure fields massing overhead like storm clouds. I jogged along at a half run, in a hurry to contact Mayer. Without his confirmation the authorities on Ceres would treat my report as the fantasy of a sand-happy lunatic. In addition, I wanted him to bring his camera; we could develop the reels within half an hour and radio a dozen stills as indisputable proof.

More important, I wanted someone to share the discovery, provide me with at least some cover in numbers. The frequency of entries on the megaliths, and the virtual absence of any further space – unless the reverse sides were used, which seemed unlikely – suggested a climax was soon to be reached, probably the climax for which Tallis had been waiting. Hundreds of entries had been made during his fifteen years on Murak; watching all day from the observatory he must have seen every landing.

As I swung into the half-track the emergency light on the transceiver above the windscreen was pulsing insistently. I switched to audio and Mayer's voice snapped into my ear.

'Quaine? Is that you? Where the hell are you, man? I nearly put out a mayday for you!'

He was at the camp site. Calling in from the observatory when I failed to arrive, he assumed I had broken down and abandoned the half-track, and had come out searching for me.

I picked him up at the camp site half an hour later, retroversed the tracks in a squealing circle of dust and kicked off again at full throttle. Mayer pressed me all the way back but I told him nothing, driving the Chrysler hard across the lake, paralleling the two previous sets of tracks and throwing up a huge cloud of dust 150 feet into the air. It was now over 95°, and the ash hills in the valley at the end of the lake were beginning to look angry and boiled.

Eager to get Mayer down into the basin, and with my mind spinning like a disintegrating flywheel, it was only as the half-track roared up the table slope that I felt a first chilling pang of fear. Through the windscreen I hesitantly scanned the tilting sky. Soon after reaching the basin we would have to shut down for an hour, two of us crammed together in the fume-filled cabin, deafened by the engine, sitting targets with the periscope blinded by the glare.

The centre of the plateau was a pulsing blur, as the air trapped in the basin throbbed upward into the sun. I drove straight towards it, Mayer stiffening in his seat. A hundred yards from the basin's edge the air suddenly cleared and we could see the tops of the megaliths. Mayer leapt up and swung out of the door onto the running board as I cut the engine and slammed the half-track to a halt by the rim. We jumped

down, grabbing flare pistols and shouting to each other, slid into the basin and sprinted through the boiling air to the megaliths looming up in the centre.

I half-expected to find a reception party waiting for us, but the megaliths were deserted. I reached the pentagon fifty yards ahead of Mayer, climbed up and waited for him, gulping in the molten sunlight.

I helped him up and led him over to one of the megaliths, picked a column and began to read out the entries. Then I took him round the others, recapitulating everything I had discovered, pointing out the blank tablet reserved for Earth.

Mayer listened, broke away and wandered off, staring up dully at the megaliths.

'Quaine, you've really found something,' he muttered softly. 'Crazy, must be some sort of temple.'

I followed him round, wiping the sweat off my face and shielding my eyes from the glare reflected off the great slabs.

'Look at them, Mayer! They've been coming here for ten thousand years! Do you know what this means?'

Mayer tentatively reached out and touched one of the megaliths. '"Argive League XXV . . . Beta Tri-"' he read out. 'There are others, then. God Almighty. What do you think they look like?'

'What does it matter? Listen. They must have levelled this plateau themselves, scooped out the basin and cut these tablets from the living rock. Can you even imagine the tools they used?'

We crouched in the narrow rectangle of shadow in the lee of the sunward megalith. The temperature climbed, forty-five minutes to noon, 105°

'What is all this, though?' Mayer asked. 'Their burial ground?'

'Unlikely. Why leave a tablet for Earth? If they've been able to learn our language they'd know the gesture was pointless. Anyway, elaborate burial customs are a sure sign of decadence, and there's something here that suggests the exact opposite. I'm convinced they expect that some time in the future we'll take an active part in whatever is celebrated here.'

'Maybe, but what? Think in new categories, remember?' Mayer squinted up at the megaliths. 'This could be anything from an ethnological bill of lading to the guest list at an all-time cosmic house party.'

He noticed something, frowned, then suddenly wrenched away from me. He leapt to his feet, pressed his hands against the surface of the slab behind us and ran his eyes carefully over the grain.

'What's worrying you?' I asked.

'Shut up!' he snapped. He scratched his thumbnail at the surface, trying to dislodge a few grains. 'What are you talking about, Quaine, these slabs aren't made of stone!'

He slipped out his jack knife, sprung the blade and stabbed viciously at the megalith, slashing a two-foot-long groove across the inscriptions.

I stood up and tried to restrain him but he shouldered me away and ran his finger down the groove, collecting a few fragments.

He turned on me angrily. 'Do you know what this is? *Tantalum oxide!* Pure ninety-nine per cent paygold. No wonder our extraction rates are fantastically small. I couldn't understand it, but these people –' he jerked his thumb furiously at the megaliths '– have damn well milked the planet dry to build these crazy things!'

It was 115°. The air was beginning to turn yellow and we were breathing in short exhausted pants.

'Let's get back to the truck,' I temporized. Mayer was losing control, carried away by his rage. With his big burly shoulders hunched in anger, staring up blindly at the five great megaliths, face contorted by the heat, he looked like an insane sub-man pinned in the time trophy of a galactic super-hunter.

He was ranting away as we stumbled through the dust towards the half-track.

'What do you want to do?' I shouted. 'Cut them down and put them through your ore crushers?'

Mayer stopped, the blue dust swirling about his legs. The air was humming as the basin floor expanded in the heart. The half-track was only fifty yards away, its refrigerated cabin a cool haven.

Mayer was watching me, nodding slowly. 'It could be done. Ten tons of Hy-Dyne planted round those slabs would crack them into small enough pieces for a tractor to handle. We could store them out at the observatory, then sneak them later into my refining tanks.'

I walked on, shaking my head with a thin grin. The heat was hitting Mayer, welling up all the irrational bitterness of a year's frustration. 'It's an idea. Why don't you get in touch with Gamma Grus? Maybe they'll give you the lease.'

'I'm serious, Quaine,' Mayer called after me. 'In a couple of years we'd be rich men.'

'You're crazy!' I shouted back at him. 'The sun's boiling your brains.'

I began to scale the slope up to the rim. The next hour in the cabin was going to be difficult, cooped up with a maniac eager to tear the stars apart. The butt of the flare pistol swinging on my knee caught my eye; a poor weapon, though, against Mayer's physique.

I had climbed almost up to the rim when I heard his feet thudding through the dust. I started to turn round just as he was on me, swinging a tremendous blow that struck me on the back of the head. I fell, watched him close in and then stood up, my skull exploding, and grappled with him. We stumbled over each other for a moment, the walls of the basin diving around us like a switchback, and then he knocked my hands away and smashed a heavy right cross into my face.

I fell on my back, stunned by the pain; the blow seemed to have loosened my jaw and damaged all the bones on the left side of my face. I managed

to sit up and saw Mayer running past. He reached one hand to the rim, pulled himself up and lurched over to the half-track.

I dragged the flare pistol out of its holster, snapped back the bolt and trained it at Mayer. He was thirty yards away, turning the nearside door handle. I held the butt with both hands and fired as he opened the door. He looked round at the sharp detonation and watched the silver shell soar swiftly through the air towards him, ready to duck.

The shell missed him by three feet and exploded against the cabin roof. There was a brilliant flash of light that resolved itself a fraction of a second later into a fireball of incandescent magnesium vapour ten feet in diameter. This slowly faded to reveal the entire driving cabin, bonnet and forward side-panels of the half-track burning strongly with a loud, heavy crackling. Out of this maelstrom suddenly plunged the figure of Mayer, moving with violent speed, blackened arms across his face. He tripped over the rim, catapulted down into the dust and rolled for about twenty yards before he finally lay still, a shapeless bundle of smoking rags.

I looked numbly at my wristwatch. It was ten minutes to noon. The temperature was 130°. I pulled myself to my feet and trudged slowly up the slope towards the half-track, head thudding like a volcano, uncertain whether I would be strong enough to lift myself out of the basin.

When I was ten feet from the rim I could see that the windscreen of the half-track had melted and was dripping like treacle onto the dashboard.

I dropped the flare pistol and turned round.

It was five minutes to noon. Around me, on all sides, enormous sheets of fire were cascading slowly from the sky, passing straight through the floor of the basin, and then rising again in an inverted torrent. The megaliths were no longer visible, screened by curtains of brilliant light, but I groped forward, following the slope, searching for what shade would still be among them.

Twenty yards farther on I saw that the sun was directly overhead. It expanded until the disc was as wide as the basin, and then lowered itself to about ten feet above my head, a thousand rivers of fire streaming across its surface in all directions. There was a terrifying roaring and barking noise, overlaid by a dull, massive pounding as all the volcanoes in the volcano jungle began to erupt again. I walked on, in a dream, shuffling slowly, eyes closed to shut out the furnace around me. Then I discovered that I was sitting on the floor of the basin, which started to spin, setting up a high-pitched screaming.

A strange vision swept like a flame through my mind.

For aeons I plunged, spiralling weightlessly through a thousand whirling vortexes, swirled and buffeted down chasmic eddies, splayed out across the disintegrating matrix of the continuum, a dreamless ghost in flight from the cosmic Now. *Then a million motes of light prickled the darkness above me, illuminating enormous curving causeways of time and space veering out past the stars to the rim of the galaxy. My dimensions shrank to a metaphysical*

extension of astral zero, I was propelled upward to the stars. Aisles of light broke and splintered around me, I passed Aldebaran, soared over Betelgeuse and Vega, zoomed past Antares, finally halted a hundred light years above the crown of Canopus.

Epochs drifted. Time massed on gigantic fronts, colliding like crippled universes. Abruptly, the infinite worlds of tomorrow unfolded before me – ten thousand years, a hundred thousand, unnumbered millennia raced past me in a blur of light, an iridescent cataract of stars and nebulae, interlaced by flashing trajectories of flight and exploration.

I entered deep time.

Deep Time: 1,000,000 mega-years. I saw the Milky Way, a wheeling carousel of fire, and Earth's remote descendants, countless races inhabiting every stellar system in the galaxy. The dark intervals between the stars were a continuously flickering field of light, a gigantic phosphorescent ocean, filled with the vibrating pulses of electromagnetic communication pathways.

To cross the enormous voids between the stars they have progressively slowed their physiological time, first ten, then a hundred-fold, so accelerating stellar and galactic time. Space has become alive with transient swarms of comets and meteors, the constellations have begun to dislocate and shift, the slow majestic rotation of the universe itself is at last visible.

Deep Time: 10,000,000 mega-years. Now they have left the Milky Way, which has started to fragment and dissolve. To reach the island galaxies they have further slowed their time schemes by a factor of 10,000, and can thus communicate with each other across vast inter-galactic distances in a subjective period of only a few years. Continuously expanding into deep space, they have extended their physiological dependence upon electronic memory banks which store the atomic and molecular patterns within their bodies, transmit them outward at the speed of light, and later re-assemble them.

Deep Time: 100,000,000 mega-years. They have spread now to all the neighbouring galaxies, swallowing thousands of nebulae. Their time schemes have decelerated a million-fold, they have become the only permanent forms in an ever-changing world. In a single instant of their lives a star emerges and dies, a sub-universe is born, a score of planetary life-systems evolve and vanish. Around them the universe sparkles and flickers with myriad points of light, as untold numbers of constellations appear and fade.

Now, too, they have finally shed their organic forms and are composed of radiating electromagnetic fields, the primary energy substratum of the universe, complex networks of multiple dimensions, alive with the constant tremor of the sentient messages they carry, bearing the life-ways of the race.

To power these fields, they have harnessed entire galaxies riding the wave-fronts of the stellar explosions out towards the terminal helixes of the universe.

Deep Time: 1,000,000,000 mega-years. They are beginning to dictate the form and dimensions of the universe. To girdle the distances which circumscribe the cosmos they have reduced their time period to 0.00000001 of its previous phase. The great galaxies and spiral nebulae which once seemed to live for eternity are now of such brief duration that they are no longer visible. The universe is now almost filled by the great vibrating mantle of ideation, a vast shimmering harp which has completely translated itself into pure wave form, independent of any generating source.

As the universe pulses slowly, its own energy vortices flexing and dilating, so the force-fields of the ideation mantle flex and dilate in sympathy, growing like an embryo within the womb of the cosmos, a child which will soon fill and consume its parent.

Deep Time: 10,000,000,000 mega-years. The ideation-field has now swallowed the cosmos, substituted its own dynamic, its own spatial and temporal dimensions. All primary time and energy fields have been engulfed. Seeking the final extension of itself within its own bounds the mantle has reduced its time period to an almost infinitesimal 0.00000000 . . . *n* of its previous interval. Time has virtually ceased to exist, the ideation-field is nearly stationary, infinitely slow eddies of sentience undulating outward across its mantles.

Ultimately it achieves the final predicates of time and space, eternity and infinity, and slows to absolute zero. Then with a cataclysmic eruption it disintegrates, no longer able to contain itself. Its vast energy patterns begin to collapse, the whole system twists and thrashes in its mortal agony, thrusting outwards huge cataracts of fragmenting energy. In parallel, time emerges.

Out of this debris the first proto-galactic fields are formed, coalescing to give the galaxies and nebulae, the stars encircled by their planetary bodies. Among these, from the elemental seas, based on the carbon atom, emerge the first living forms.

So the cycle renews itself . . .

The stars swam, their patterns shifting through a dozen constellations, novas flooded the darkness like blinding arcs, revealing the familiar profiles of the Milky Way, the constellations Orion, Coma Berenices, Cygnus.

Lowering my eyes from the storm-tossed sky, I saw the five megaliths. I was back on Murak. Around me the basin was filled with a great concourse of silent figures, ranged upward along the darkened slopes, shoulder to shoulder in endless ranks, like spectators in a spectral arena.

Beside me a voice spoke, and it seemed to have told me everything I had witnessed of the great cosmic round.

Just before I sank into unconsciousness for the last time I tried to ask the question ever present in my drifting mind, but it answered before I spoke, the star-littered sky, the five megaliths and the watching multitude spinning and swirling away into a dream as it said

'Meanwhile we wait here, at the threshold of time and space, celebrating the identity and kinship of the particles within our bodies with those of the sun and the stars of our brief private times with the vast periods of the galaxies, with the total unifying time of the cosmos . . .'

I woke lying face downward in the cool evening sand, shadows beginning to fill the basin, the thermal winds blowing a crisp refreshing breeze across my head and back. Below, the megaliths rose up into the thin blue air, their lower halves cut by the shadow-line of the sinking sun. I lay quietly, stirring my legs and arms tentatively, conscious of the gigantic rifts that had driven through my mind. After a few minutes I pulled myself to my feet and gazed round at the slopes curving away from me, the memory of the insane vision vivid in my mind.

The vast concourse that had filled the basin, the dream of the cosmic cycle, the voice of my interlocutor – were still real to me, a world in parallel I had just stepped from, and the door to which hung somewhere in the air around me.

Had I dreamed everything, assembling the entire fantasy in my mind as I lay raving in the noon heat, saved by some thermodynamic freak of the basin's architecture?

I held my thermo-alarm up to the fading light, checking the maximum and minimum levels. The maximum read 162°. Yet I had survived! I felt relaxed, restored, almost rejuvenated. My hands and face were unburnt – a temperature of over 160° would have boiled the flesh off my bones, left my skin a blackened crisp.

Over my shoulder I noticed the half-track standing on the rim. I ran towards it, for the first time remembering Mayer's death. I felt my cheek-bones, testing my jaw muscles. Surprisingly Mayer's heavy punches had left no bruise.

Mayer's body had gone! A single line of footsteps led down from the half-track to the megaliths, but otherwise the carpet of light blue dust was untouched. Mayer's prints, all marks of our scuffle, had vanished.

I quickly scaled the rim and reached the half-track, peering under the chassis and between the tracks. I flung open the cabin door, found the compartment empty.

The windscreen was intact. The paintwork on the door and bonnet was unmarked, the metal trim around the windows unscratched. I dropped to my knees, vainly searched for any flakes of magnesium ash. On my knee the flare pistol lodged securely in its holster, a primed star shell in the breach.

I left the Chrysler, jumped down into the basin and ran over to the megaliths. For an hour I paced round them, trying to resolve the countless questions that jammed my mind.

Just before I left I went over to the fifth tablet. I looked up at the top left corner, wondering whether I should have qualified for its first entry had I died that afternoon.

A single row of letters, filled with shadow by the falling light, stood out clearly.

I stepped back and craned up at them. There were the symbols of the four alien languages, and then, proudly against the stars:

CHARLES FOSTER NELSON EARTH AD 2217

'Tell me, Quaine, where would you like to be when the world ends?'

In the seven years since Tallis first asked me this question I must have re-examined it a thousand times. Somehow it seems the key to all the extraordinary events that have happened on Murak, with their limitless implications for the people of Earth (to me a satisfactory answer contains an acceptable statement of one's philosophy and beliefs, an adequate discharge of the one moral debt we owe ourselves and the universe).

Not that the world is about to 'end'. The implication is rather that it has already ended and regenerated itself an infinite number of times, and that the only remaining question is what to do with ourselves in the meantime. The four stellar races who built the megaliths chose to come to Murak. What exactly they are waiting for here I can't be certain. A cosmic redeemer, perhaps, the first sight of the vast mantle of ideation I glimpsed in my vision. Recalling the period of two million years Tallis cited for life to appear on Murak it may be that the next cosmic cycle will receive its impetus here, and that we are advance spectators, five kings come to attend the genesis of a super-species which will soon outstrip us.

That there are others here, invisible and sustained by preternatural forces, is without doubt. Apart from the impossibility of surviving a Murak noon, I certainly didn't remove Mayer's body from the basin and arrange to have him electrocuted by one of the data-processing units at the observatory. Nor did I conceive the vision of the cosmic cycle myself.

It looks as if the two geologists stumbled upon the Waiting Grounds, somehow divined their significance, and then let Tallis in on their discovery. Perhaps they disagreed, as Mayer and I did, and Nelson may have been forced to kill his companion, to die himself a year later in the course of his vigil.

Like Tallis I shall wait here if necessary for fifteen years. I go out to the Grounds once a week and watch them from the observatory the rest of the time. So far I have seen nothing, although two or three hundred more names have been added to the tablets. However, I am certain that whatever we are waiting for will soon arrive. When I get tired or impatient,

as I sometimes do, I remind myself that they have been coming to Murak and waiting here, generation upon generation, for 10,000 years.

Whatever it is, it must be worth waiting for.

1959

NOW: ZERO

You ask: how did I discover this insane and fantastic power? Like Dr Faust, was it bestowed upon me by the Devil himself, in exchange for the deed to my soul? Did I, perhaps, acquire it with some strange talismanic object – idol's eyepiece or monkey's paw – unearthed in an ancient chest or bequeathed by a dying mariner? Or, again, did I stumble upon it myself while researching into the obscenities of the Eleusinian Mysteries and the Black Mass, suddenly perceiving its full horror and magnitude through clouds of sulphurous smoke and incense?

None of these. In fact, the power revealed itself to me quite accidentally, during the commonplaces of the everyday round, appearing unobtrusively at my fingertips like a talent for embroidery. Indeed, its appearance was so unheralded, so gradual, that at first I failed to recognize it at all.

But again you ask: why should I tell you this, describe the incredible and hitherto unsuspected sources of my power, freely catalogue the names of my victims, the date and exact manner of their quietus? Am I so mad as to be positively eager for justice – arraignment, the black cap, and the hangman leaping on to my shoulders like Quasimodo, ringing the deathbell from my throat?

No, (consummate irony!) it is the strange nature of my power that I have nothing to fear from broadcasting its secret to all who will listen. I am the power's servant, and in describing it now I still serve it, carrying it faithfully, as you shall see, to its final conclusion.

However, to begin.

Rankin, my immediate superior at the Everlasting Insurance company, became the hapless instrument of the fate which was first to reveal the power to me.

I loathed Rankin. He was bumptious and assertive, innately vulgar, and owed his position solely to an unpleasant cunning and his persistent refusal to recommend me to the directorate for promotion. He had consolidated his position as department manager by marrying a daughter of one of the directors (a dismal harridan, I may add) and was consequently unassailable. Our relationship was based on mutual contempt, but whereas I was prepared to accept my role, confident that my own qualities would ultimately recommend themselves to the directors, Rankin deliberately

took advantage of his seniority, seizing every opportunity to offend and denigrate me.

He would systematically undermine my authority over the secretarial staff, who were tacitly under my control, by appointing others at random to the position. He would give me long-term projects of little significance to work on, so segregating me from the rest of the office. Above all, he sought to antagonize me by his personal mannerisms. He would sing, hum, sit uninvited on my desk as he made small talk with the typists, then call me into his office and keep me waiting pointlessly at his shoulder as he read silently through an entire file.

Although I controlled myself, my abomination of Rankin grew remorselessly. I would leave the office seething with anger at his viciousness, sit in the train home with my newspaper opened but my eyes blinded by rage. My evenings and weekends would be ruined, wastelands of anger and futile bitterness.

Inevitably, thoughts of revenge grew, particularly as I suspected that Rankin was passing unfavourable reports of my work to the directors. Satisfactory revenge, however, was hard to achieve. Finally I decided upon a course I despised, driven to it by desperation: the anonymous letter – not to the directors, for the source would have been too easily discovered, but to Rankin and his wife.

My first letters, the familiar indictments of infidelity, I never posted. They seemed naïve, inadequate, too obviously the handiwork of a paranoiac with a grudge. I locked them away in a small steel box, later re-drafted them, striking out the staler crudities and trying to substitute something more subtle, a hint of perversion and obscenity, that would plunge deeper barbs of suspicion into the reader's mind.

It was while composing the letter to Mrs Rankin, itemizing in an old notebook the more despicable of her husband's qualities, that I discovered the curious relief afforded by the exercise of composition, by the formal statement, in the minatory language of the anonymous letter (which is, certainly, a specialized branch of literature, with its own classical rules and permitted devices) of the viciousness and depravity of the letter's subject and the terrifying nemesis awaiting him. Of course, this catharsis is familiar to those regularly able to recount unpleasant experiences to priest, friend or wife, but to me, who lived a solitary, friendless life, its discovery was especially poignant.

Over the next few days I made a point each evening on my return home of writing out a short indictment of Rankin's iniquities, analysing his motives, and even anticipating the slights and abuses of the next day. These I would cast in the form of narrative, allowing myself a fair degree of licence, introducing imaginary situations and dialogues that served to highlight Rankin's atrocious behaviour and my own stoical forbearance.

The compensation was welcome, for simultaneously Rankin's campaign against me increased. He became openly abusive, criticized my work before

junior members of the staff, even threatened to report me to the directors. One afternoon he drove me to such a frenzy that I barely restrained myself from assaulting him. I hurried home, unlocked my writing box and sought relief in my diaries. I wrote page after page, re-enacting in my narrative the day's events, then reaching forward to our final collision the following morning, culminating in an accident that intervened to save me from dismissal.

My last lines were:

> *. . . Shortly after 2 o'clock the next afternoon, spying from his usual position on the 7th floor stairway for any employees returning late from lunch, Rankin suddenly lost his balance, toppled over the rail and fell to his death in the entrance hall below.*

As I wrote this fictitious scene it seemed scant justice, but little did I realize that a weapon of enormous power had been placed gently between my fingers.

Coming back to the office after lunch the next day I was surprised to find a small crowd gathered outside the entrance, a police car and ambulance pulled up by the kerb. As I pushed forward up the steps, several policemen emerged from the building clearing the way for two orderlies carrying a stretcher across which a sheet had been drawn, revealing the outlines of a human form. The face was concealed, and I gathered from conversation around me that someone had died. Two of the directors appeared, their faces shocked and drawn.

'Who is it?' I asked one of the office boys who were hanging around breathlessly.

'Mr Rankin,' he whispered. He pointed up the stairwell. 'He slipped over the railing on the 7th floor, fell straight down, completely smashed one of those big tiles outside the lift . . .'

He gabbled on, but I turned away, numbed and shaken by the sheer physical violence that hung in the air. The ambulance drove off, the crowd dispersed, the directors returned, exchanging expressions of grief and astonishment with other members of the staff, the janitors took away their mops and buckets, leaving behind them a damp red patch and the shattered tile.

Within an hour I had recovered. Sitting in front of Rankin's empty office, watching the typists hover helplessly around his desk, apparently unconvinced that their master would never return, my heart began to warm and sing. I became transformed, a load which had threatened to break me had been removed from my back, my mind relaxed, the tensions and bitterness dissipated. Rankin had gone, finally and irrevocably. The era of injustice had ended.

I contributed generously to the memorial fund which made the rounds

of the office; I attended the funeral, gloating inwardly as the coffin was bundled into the sod, joining fulsomely in the expressions of regret. I readied myself to occupy Rankin's desk, my rightful inheritance.

My surprise a few days later can easily be imagined when Carter, a younger man of far less experience and generally accepted as my junior, was promoted to fill Rankin's place. At first I was merely baffled, quite unable to grasp the tortuous logic that could so offend all laws of precedence and merit. I assumed that Rankin had done his work of denigrating me only too well.

However, I accepted the rebuff, offered Carter my loyalty and assisted his reorganization of the office.

Superficially these changes were minor. But later I realized that they were far more calculating than at first seemed, and transferred the bulk of power within the office to Carter's hands, leaving me with the routine work, the files of which never left the department or passed to the directors. I saw too that over the previous year Carter had been carefully familiarizing himself with all aspects of my job and was taking credit for work I had done during Rankin's tenure of office.

Finally I challenged Carter openly, but far from being evasive he simply emphasized my subordinate role. From then on he ignored my attempts at a rapprochement and did all he could to antagonize me.

The final insult came when Jacobson joined the office to fill Carter's former place and was officially designated Carter's deputy.

That evening I brought down the steel box in which I kept record of Rankin's persecutions and began to describe all that I was beginning to suffer at the hands of Carter.

During a pause the last entry in the Rankin diary caught my eye:

. . . Rankin suddenly lost his balance, toppled over the rail and fell to his death in the entrance hall below.

The words seemed to be alive, they had strangely vibrant overtones. Not only were they a remarkably accurate forecast of Rankin's fate, but they had a distinctly magnetic and compulsive power that separated them sharply from the rest of the entries. Somewhere within my mind a voice, vast and sombre, slowly intoned them.

On a sudden impulse I turned the page, found a clean sheet and wrote:

The next afternoon Carter died in a street accident outside the office.

What childish game was I playing? I was forced to smile at myself, as primitive and irrational as a Haitian witch doctor transfixing a clay image of his enemy.

* * *

I was sitting in the office the following day when the squeal of tyres in the street below riveted me to my chair. Traffic stopped abruptly and there was a sudden hubbub followed by silence. Only Carter's office overlooked the street; he had gone out half an hour earlier so we pressed past his desk and leaned out through the window.

A car had skidded sharply across the pavement and a group of ten or a dozen men were lifting it carefully back on to the roadway. It was undamaged but what appeared to be oil was leaking sluggishly into the gutter. Then we saw the body of a man outstretched beneath the car, his arms and head twisted awkwardly.

The colour of his suit was oddly familiar.

Two minutes later we knew it was Carter.

That night I destroyed my notebook and all records I had made about Rankin's behaviour. Was it coincidence, or in some way had I willed his death, and in the same way Carter's? Impossible – no conceivable connection could exist between the diaries and the two deaths, the pencil marks on the sheets of paper were arbitrary curved lines of graphite, representing ideas which existed only in my mind.

But the solution to my doubts and speculations was too obvious to be avoided.

I locked the door, turned a fresh page of the notebook and cast round for a suitable subject. I picked up my evening paper. A young man had just been reprieved from the death penalty for the murder of an old woman. His face stared from a photograph coarse, glowering, conscienceless.

I wrote:

Frank Taylor died the next day in Pentonville Prison.

The scandal created by Taylor's death almost brought about the resignations of both the Home Secretary and the Prison Commissioners. During the next few days violent charges were levelled in all directions by the newspapers, and it finally transpired that Taylor had been brutally beaten to death by his warders. I carefully read the evidence and findings of the tribunal of enquiry when they were published, hoping that they might throw some light on the extraordinary and malevolent agency which linked the statements in my diaries with the inevitable deaths on the subsequent day.

However, as I feared, they suggested nothing. Meanwhile I sat quietly in my office, automatically carrying out my work, obeying Jacobson's instructions without comment, my mind elsewhere, trying to grasp the identity and import of the power bestowed on me.

Still unconvinced, I decided on a final test, in which I would give precisely detailed instructions, to rule out once and for all any possibility of coincidence.

Conveniently, Jacobson offered himself as my subject.

So, the door locked securely behind me, I wrote with trembling fingers, fearful lest the pencil wrench itself from me and plunge into my heart.

Jacobson died at 2.43 P.M. the next day after slashing his wrists with a razor blade in the second cubicle from the left in the men's washroom on the third floor.

I sealed the notebook into an envelope, locked it into the box and lay awake through a sleepless night, the words echoing in my ears, glowing before my eyes like jewels of Hell.

After Jacobson's death – exactly according to my instructions – the staff of the department were given a week's holiday (in part to keep them away from curious newspapermen, who were beginning to scent a story, and also because the directors believed that Jacobson had been morbidly influenced by the deaths of Rankin and Carter). During those seven days I chafed impatiently to return to work. My whole attitude to the power had undergone a considerable change. Having to my own satisfaction verified its existence, if not its source, my mind turned again towards the future. Gaining confidence, I realized that if I had been bequeathed the power it was my obligation to restrain any fears and make use of it. I reminded myself that I might be merely the tool of some greater force.

Alternatively, was the diary no more than a mirror which revealed the future, was I in some fantastic way twenty-four hours ahead of time when I described the deaths, simply a recorder of events that had already taken place?

These questions exercised my mind ceaselessly.

On my return to work I found that many members of the staff had resigned, their places being filled only with difficulty, news of the three deaths, particularly Jacobson's suicide, having reached the newspapers. The directors' appreciation of those senior members of the staff who remained with the firm I was able to turn to good account in consolidating my position. At last I took over command of the department – but this was no more than my due, and my eyes were now set upon a directorship.

All too literally, I would step into dead men's shoes.

Briefly, my strategy was to precipitate a crisis in the affairs of the firm which would force the board to appoint new executive directors from the ranks of the department managers. I therefore waited until a week before the next meeting of the board, and then wrote out four slips of paper, one for each of the executive directors. Once a director I should be in a position to propel myself rapidly to the chairmanship of the board, by appointing my own candidates to vacancies as they successively appeared. As chairman I should automatically find a seat on the board of the parent company, there to repeat the process, with whatever variations necessary. As soon as real power came within my orbit my rise to absolute national, and ultimately global, supremacy would be swift and irreversible.

If this seems naïvely ambitious, remember that I had as yet failed to appreciate the real dimensions and purpose of the power, and still thought in the categories of my own narrow world and background.

A week later, as the sentences on the four directors simultaneously expired, I sat calmly in my office, reflecting upon the brevity of human life, waiting for the inevitable summons to the board. Understandably, the news of their deaths, in a succession of car accidents, brought general consternation upon the office, of which I was able to take advantage by retaining the only cool head.

To my amazement the next day I, with the rest of the staff, received a month's pay in lieu of notice. Completely flabbergasted – at first I feared that I had been discovered – I protested volubly to the chairman, but was assured that although everything I had done was deeply appreciated, the firm was nonetheless no longer able to support itself as a viable unit and was going into enforced liquidation.

A farce indeed! So a grotesque justice had been done. As I left the office for the last time that morning I realized that in future I must use my power ruthlessly. Hesitation, the exercise of scruple, the calculation of niceties – these merely made me all the more vulnerable to the inconstancies and barbarities of fate. Henceforth I would be brutal, merciless, bold. Also, I must not delay. The power might wane, leave me defenceless, even less fortunately placed than before it revealed itself.

My first task was to establish the power's limits. During the next week I carried out a series of experiments to assess its capacity, working my way progressively up the scale of assassination.

It happened that my lodgings were positioned some two or three hundred feet below one of the principal airlanes into the city. For years I had suffered the nerve-shattering roar of airliners flying in overhead at two-minute intervals, shaking the walls and ceiling, destroying thought. I took down my notebooks. Here was a convenient opportunity to couple research with redress.

You wonder did I feel no qualms of conscience for the 75 victims who hurtled to their deaths across the evening sky twenty-four hours later, no sympathy for their relatives, no doubts as to the wisdom of wielding my power indiscriminately?

I answer: No! Far from being indiscriminate I was carrying out an experiment vital to the furtherance of my power.

I decided on a bolder course. I had been born in Stretchford, a mean industrial slum that had done its best to cripple my spirit and body. At last it could justify itself by testing the efficacy of the power over a wide area.

In my notebook I wrote the short flat statement:

Every inhabitant of Stretchford died at noon the next day.

Early the following morning I went out and bought a radio, sat by it

patiently all day, waiting for the inevitable interruption of the afternoon programmes by the first horrified reports of the vast Midland holocaust.

Nothing, however, was reported! I was astonished, the orientations of my mind disrupted, its very sanity threatened. Had my power dissipated itself, vanishing as quickly and unexpectedly as it had appeared?

Or were the authorities deliberately suppressing all mention of the cataclysm, fearful of national hysteria?

I immediately took the train to Stretchford.

At the station I tactfully made inquiries, was assured that the city was firmly in existence. Were my informants, though, part of the government's conspiracy of silence, was it aware that a monstrous agency was at work, and was somehow hoping to trap it?

But the city was inviolate, its streets filled with traffic, the smoke of countless factories drifting across the blackened rooftops.

I returned late that evening, only to find my landlady importuning me for my rent. I managed to postpone her demands for a day, promptly unlocked my diary and passed sentence upon her, praying that the power had not entirely deserted me.

The sweet relief I experienced the next morning when she was discovered at the foot of the basement staircase, claimed by a sudden stroke, can well be imagined.

So my power still existed!

During the succeeding weeks its principal features disclosed themselves. First, I discovered that it operated only within the bounds of feasibility. Theoretically the simultaneous deaths of the entire population of Stretchford might have been effected by the coincident explosions of several hydrogen bombs, but as this event was itself apparently impossible (hollow, indeed, are the boastings of our militarist leaders) the command was never carried out.

Secondly, the power entirely confined itself to the passage of the sentence of death. I attempted to control or forecast the motions of the stock market, the results of horse races, the behaviour of my employers at my new job – all to no avail.

As for the sources of the power, these never revealed themselves. I could only conclude that I was merely the agent, the willing clerk, of some macabre nemesis struck like an arc between the point of my pencil and the vellum of my diaries.

Sometimes it seemed to me that the brief entries I made were cross-sections through the narrative of some vast book of the dead existing in another dimension, and that as I made them my handwriting overlapped that of a greater scribe's along the narrow pencilled line where our respective planes of time crossed each other, instantly drawing from the eternal banks of death a final statement of account on to some victim within the tangible world around me.

The diaries I kept securely sealed within a large steel safe and all entries

were made with the utmost care and secrecy, to prevent any suspicion linking me with the mounting catalogue of deaths and disasters. The majority of these were effected solely for purposes of experiment and brought me little or no personal gain.

It was therefore all the more surprising when I discovered that the police had begun to keep me under sporadic observation.

I first noticed this when I saw my landlady's successor in surreptitious conversation with the local constable, pointing up the stairs to my room and making head-tapping motions, presumably to indicate my telepathic and mesmeric talents. Later, a man whom I can now identify as a plainclothes detective stopped me in the street on some flimsy pretext and started a wandering conversation about the weather, obviously designed to elicit information.

No charges were ever laid against me, but subsequently my employers also began to watch me in a curious manner. I therefore assumed that the possession of the power had invested me with a distinct and visible aura, and it was this that stimulated curiosity.

As this aura became detectable by greater and greater numbers of people – it would be noticed in bus queues and cafés – and the first oblique, and for some puzzling reason, amused references to it were made openly by members of the public, I knew that the power's period of utility was ending. No longer would I be able to exercise it without fear of detection. I should have to destroy the diary, sell the safe which so long had held its secret, probably even refrain from ever thinking about the power lest this alone generate the aura.

To be forced to lose the power, when I was only on the threshold of its potential, seemed a cruel turn of fate. For reasons which still remained closed to me, I had managed to penetrate behind the veil of commonplaces and familiarity which masks the inner world of the timeless and the preternatural. Must the power, and the vision it revealed, be lost forever?

This question ran through my mind as I looked for the last time through my diary. It was almost full now, and I reflected that it formed one of the most extraordinary texts, if unpublished, in the history of literature. Here, indeed, was established the primacy of the pen over the sword!

Savouring this thought, I suddenly had an inspiration of remarkable force and brilliance. I had stumbled upon an ingenious but simple method of preserving the power in its most impersonal and lethal form without having to wield it myself and itemize my victims' names.

This was my scheme: I would write and have published an apparently fictional story in conventional narrative in which I would describe, with complete frankness, my discovery of the power and its subsequent history. I would detail precisely the names of my victims, the mode of their deaths, the growth of my diary and the succession of experiments I carried out. I would be scrupulously honest, holding nothing back whatsoever. In

conclusion I would tell of my decision to abandon the power and publish a full and dispassionate account of all that had happened.

Accordingly, after a considerable labour, the story was written and published in a magazine of wide circulation.

You show surprise? I agree; as such I should merely have been signing my own death warrant in indelible ink and delivering myself straight to the gallows. However, I omitted a single feature of the story: its denouement, or surprise ending, the twist in its tail. Like all respectable stories, this one too had its twist, indeed one so violent as to throw the earth itself out of its orbit. This was precisely what it was designed to do.

For the twist in this story was that it contained my last command to the power, my final sentence of death.

Upon whom? Who else, but upon the story's reader!

Ingenious, certainly, you willingly admit. As long as issues of the magazine remain in circulation (and their proximity to victims of this extraordinary plague guarantees that) the power will continue its task of annihilation. Its author alone will remain unmolested, for no court will hear evidence at second hand, and who will live to give it at first hand?

But where, you ask, was the story published, fearful that you may inadvertently buy the magazine and read it.

I answer: Here! It is the story that lies before you now. Savour it well, its finish is your own. As you read these last few lines you will be overwhelmed by horror and revulsion, then by fear and panic. Your heart seizes, its pulse falling . . . your mind clouds . . . your life ebbs . . . you are sinking, within a few seconds you will join eternity . . . three . . . two . . . one . . .

Now!

Zero.

1959

THE SOUND-SWEEP

ONE

By midnight Madame Gioconda's headache had become intense. All day the derelict walls and ceiling of the sound stage had reverberated with the endless din of traffic accelerating across the mid-town flyover which arched fifty feet above the studio's roof, a frenzied hypermanic babel of jostling horns, shrilling tyres, plunging brakes and engines that hammered down the empty corridors and stairways to the sound stage on the second floor, making the faded air feel leaden and angry.

Exhausting but at least impersonal, these sounds Madame Gioconda could bear. At dusk, however, when the flyover quietened, they were overlaid by the mysterious clapping of her phantoms, the sourceless applause that rustled down on to the stage from the darkness around her. At first a few scattered ripples from the front rows, it soon spread to the entire auditorium, mounting to a tumultuous ovation in which she suddenly detected a note of sarcasm, a single shout of derision that drove a spear of pain through her forehead, followed by an uproar of boos and catcalls that filled the tortured air, driving her away towards her couch where she lay gasping helplessly until Mangon arrived at midnight, hurrying on to the stage with his sonovac.

Understanding her, he first concentrated on sweeping the walls and ceiling clean, draining away the heavy depressing under-layer of traffic noises. Carefully he ran the long snout of the sonovac over the ancient scenic flats (relics of her previous roles at the Metropolitan Opera House) which screened in Madame Gioconda's make-shift home – the great collapsing Byzantine bed (*Othello*) mounted against the microphone turret; the huge framed mirrors with their peeling silver-screen (*Orpheus*) stacked in one corner by the bandstand; the stove (*Trovatore*) set up on the programme director's podium; the gilt-trimmed dressing table and wardrobe (*Figaro*) stuffed with newspaper and magazine cuttings. He swept them methodically, moving the sonovac's nozzle in long strokes, drawing out the dead residues of sound that had accumulated during the day.

By the time he finished the air was clear again, the atmosphere lightened, its overtones of fatigue and irritation dissipated. Gradually Madame Gioconda recovered. Sitting up weakly, she smiled wanly at

Mangon. Mangon grinned back encouragingly, slipped the kettle on to the stove for Russian tea, sweetened by the usual phenobarbitone chaser, switched off the sonovac and indicated to her that he was going outside to empty it.

Down in the alley behind the studio he clipped the sonovac on to the intake manifold of the sound truck. The vacuum drained in a few seconds, but he waited a discretionary two or three minutes before returning, keeping up the pretence that Madame Gioconda's phantom audience was real. Of course the cylinder was always empty, containing only the usual daily detritus – the sounds of a door slam, a partition collapsing somewhere or the kettle whistling, a grunt or two, and later, when the headaches began, Madame Gioconda's pitiful moanings. The riotous applause, which would have lifted the roof off the Met, let alone a small radio station, the jeers and hoots of derision were, he knew, quite imaginary, figments of Madame Gioconda's world of fantasy, phantoms from the past of a once great *prima donna* who had been dropped by her public and had retreated into her imagination, each evening conjuring up a blissful dream of being once again applauded by a full house at the Metropolitan, a dream that guilt and resentment turned sour by midnight, inverting it into a nightmare of fiasco and failure.

Why she should torment herself was difficult to understand, but at least the nightmare kept Madame Gioconda just this side of sanity and Mangon, who revered and loved Madame Gioconda, would have been the last person in the world to disillusion her. Each evening, when he finished his calls for the day, he would drive his sound truck all the way over from the West Side to the abandoned radio station under the flyover at the deserted end of F Street, go through the pretence of sweeping Madame Gioconda's apartment on the stage of studio 2, charging no fee, make tea and listen to her reminiscences and plans for revenge, then see her asleep and tiptoe out, a wry but pleased smile on his youthful face.

He had been calling on Madame Gioconda for nearly a year, but what his precise role was in relation to her he had not yet decided. Oddly enough, although he was more or less indispensable now to the effective operation of her fantasy world she showed little personal interest or affection for Mangon, but he assumed that this indifference was merely part of the autocratic personality of a world-famous *prima donna*, particularly one very conscious of the tradition, now alas meaningless, Melba – Callas – Gioconda. To serve at all was the privilege. In time, perhaps, Madame Gioconda might accord him some sign of favour.

Without him, certainly, her prognosis would have been poor. Lately the headaches had become more menacing, as she insisted that the applause was growing stormier, the boos and catcalls more vicious. Whatever the psychic mechanism generating the fantasy system, Mangon realized that ultimately she would need him at the studio all day, holding back the enveloping tides of nightmare and insanity with sham passes of the sonovac. Then, perhaps, when the dream crumbled, he would regret

having helped her to delude herself. With luck though she might achieve her ambition of making a comeback. She had told him something of her scheme – a serpentine mixture of blackmail and bribery – and privately Mangon hoped to launch a plot of his own to return her to popularity. By now she had unfortunately reached the point where success alone could save her from disaster.

She was sitting up when he returned, propped back on an enormous gold *lamé* cushion, the single lamp at the foot of the couch throwing a semicircle of light on to the great flats which divided the sound stage from the auditorium. These were all from her last operatic role – *The Medium* – and represented a complete interior of the old spiritualist's seance chamber, the one coherent feature in Madame Gioconda's present existence. Surrounded by fragments from a dozen roles, even Madame Gioconda herself, Mangon reflected, seemed compounded of several separate identities. A tall regal figure, with full shapely shoulders and massive rib-cage, she had a large handsome face topped by a magnificent coiffure of rich blue-black hair – the exact prototype of the classical diva. She must have been almost fifty, yet her soft creamy complexion and small features were those of a child. The eyes, however, belied her. Large and watchful, slashed with mascara, they regarded the world around her balefully, narrowing even as Mangon approached. Her teeth too were bad, stained by tobacco and cheap cocaine. When she was roused, and her full violet lips curled with rage, revealing the blackened hulks of her dentures and the acid flickering tongue, her mouth looked like a very vent of hell. Altogether she was a formidable woman.

As Mangon brought her tea she heaved herself up and made room for him by her feet among the debris of beads, loose diary pages, horoscopes and jewelled address books that littered the couch. Mangon sat down, surreptitiously noting the time (his first calls were at 9.30 the next morning and loss of sleep deadened his acute hearing), and prepared himself to listen to her for half an hour.

Suddenly she flinched, shrank back into the cushion and gestured agitatedly in the direction of the darkened bandstand.

'They're still clapping!' she shrieked. 'For God's sake sweep them away, they're driving me insane. Oooohh . . .' she rasped theatrically, 'over there, quickly . . . !'

Mangon leapt to his feet. He hurried over to the bandstand and carefully focused his ears on the tiers of seats and plywood music stands. They were all immaculately clean, well below the threshold at which embedded sounds began to radiate detectable echoes. He turned to the corner walls and ceiling. Listening very carefully he could just hear seven muted pads, the dull echoes of his footsteps across the floor. They faded and vanished, followed by a low threshing noise like blurred radio static – in fact Madame Gioconda's present tantrum. Mangon could almost distinguish the individual words, but repetition muffled them.

Madame Gioconda was still writhing about on the couch, evidently not to be easily placated, so Mangon climbed down off the stage and made his way through the auditorium to where he had left his sonovac by the door. The power lead was outside in the truck but he was sure Madame Gioconda would fail to notice.

For five minutes he worked away industriously, pretending to sweep the bandstand again, then put down the sonovac and returned to the couch.

Madame Gioconda emerged from the cushion, sounded the air carefully with two or three slow turns of the head, and smiled at him.

'Thank you, Mangon,' she said silkily, her eyes watching him thoughtfully. 'You've saved me again from my assassins. They've become so cunning recently, they can even hide from you.'

Mangon smiled ruefully to himself at this last remark. So he had been a little too perfunctory earlier on; Madame Gioconda was keeping him up to the mark.

However, she seemed genuinely grateful. 'Mangon, my dear,' she reflected as she remade her face in the mirror of an enormous compact, painting on magnificent green eyes like a cobra's, 'what would I do without you? How can I ever repay you for looking after me?'

The questions, whatever their sinister undertones (had he detected them, Mangon would have been deeply shocked) were purely rhetorical, and all their conversations for that matter entirely one-sided. For Mangon was a mute. From the age of three, when his mother had savagely punched him in the throat to stop him crying, he had been stone dumb, his vocal cords irreparably damaged. In all their endless exchanges of midnight confidences, Mangon had contributed not a single spoken word.

His muteness, naturally, was part of the attraction he felt for Madame Gioconda. Both of them in a sense had lost their voices, he to a cruel mother, she to a fickle and unfaithful public. This bound them together, gave them a shared sense of life's injustice, though Mangon, like all innocents, viewed his misfortune without rancour. Both, too, were social outcasts. Rescued from his degenerate parents when he was four, Mangon had been brought up in a succession of state institutions, a solitary wounded child. His one talent had been his remarkable auditory powers, and at fourteen he was apprenticed to the Metropolitan Sonic Disposal Service. Regarded as little better than garbage collectors, the sound-sweeps were an outcast group of illiterates, mutes (the city authorities preferred these – their discretion could be relied upon) and social cripples who lived in a chain of isolated shacks on the edge of an old explosives plant in the sand dunes to the north of the city which served as the sonic dump.

Mangon had made no friends among the sound-sweeps, and Madame Gioconda was the first person in his life with whom he had been intimately involved. Apart from the pleasure of being able to help her, a considerable factor in Mangon's devotion was that until her decline she had represented (as to all mutes) the most painful possible reminder of his own voiceless

condition, and that now he could at last come to terms with years of unconscious resentment.

This soon done, he devoted himself wholeheartedly to serving Madame Gioconda.

Inhaling moodily on a black cigarette clamped into a long jade holder, she was outlining her plans for a comeback. These had been maturing for several months and involved nothing less than persuading Hector LeGrande, chairman-in-chief of Video City, the huge corporation that transmitted a dozen TV and radio channels, into providing her with a complete series of television spectaculars. Built around Madame Gioconda and lavishly dressed and orchestrated, they would spearhead the international revival of classical opera that was her unfading dream.

'La Scala, Covent Garden, the Met – what are they now?' she demanded angrily. 'Bowling alleys! Can you believe, Mangon, that in those immortal theatres where I created my Tosca, my Butterfly, my Brünnhilde, they now have –' she spat out a gust of smoke '– beer and skittles!'

Mangon shook his head sympathetically. He pulled a pencil from his breast-pocket and on the wrist-pad stitched to his left sleeve wrote:

Mr LeGrande?

Madame Gioconda read the note, let it fall to the floor.

'Hector? Those lawyers poison him. He's surrounded by them, I think they steal all my telegrams to him. Of course Hector had a complete breakdown on the spectaculars. Imagine, Mangon, what a scoop for him, a sensation! 'The great Gioconda will appear on television!' Not just some moronic bubblegum girl, but the Gioconda in person.'

Exhausted by this vision Madame Gioconda sank back into her cushion, blowing smoke limply through the holder.

Mangon wrote:

Contract?

Madame Gioconda frowned at the note, then pierced it with the glowing end of her cigarette.

'I am having a new contract drawn up. Not for the mere 300,000 I was prepared to take at first, not even 500,000. For each show I shall now demand precisely *one million* dollars. Nothing less! Hector will have to pay for ignoring me. Anyway, think of the publicity value of such a figure. Only a star could think of such vulgar extravagance. If he's short of cash he can sack all those lawyers. Or devalue the dollar, I don't mind.'

Madame Gioconda hooted with pleasure at the prospect. Mangon nodded, then scribbled another message.

Be practical.

Madame Gioconda ground out her cigarette. 'You think I'm raving, don't you, Mangon? "Fantastic dreams, million-dollar contracts, poor old fool." But let me assure you that Hector will be only too eager to sign the contract. And I don't intend to rely solely on his good judgement as an impresario.' She smirked archly to herself.

What else?

Madame Gioconda peered round the darkened stage, then lowered her eyes.

'You see, Mangon, Hector and I are very old friends. You know what I mean, of course?' She waited for Mangon, who had swept out a thousand honeymoon hotel suites, to nod and then continued: 'How well I remember that first season at Bayreuth, when Hector and I . . .'

Mangon stared unhappily at his feet as Madame Gioconda outlined this latest venture into blackmail. Certainly she and LeGrande had been intimate friends – the cuttings scattered around the stage testified frankly to this. In fact, were it not for the small monthly cheque which LeGrande sent Madame Gioconda she would long previously have disintegrated. To turn on him and threaten ancient scandal (LeGrande was shortly to enter politics) was not only grotesque but extremely dangerous, for LeGrande was ruthless and unsentimental. Years earlier he had used Madame Gioconda as a stepping-stone, reaping all the publicity he could from their affair, then abruptly kicking her away.

Mangon fretted. A solution to her predicament was hard to find. Brought about through no fault of her own, Madame Gioconda's decline was all the harder to bear. Since the introduction a few years earlier of ultrasonic music, the human voice – indeed, audible music of any type – had gone completely out of fashion. Ultrasonic music, employing a vastly greater range of octaves, chords and chromatic scales than are audible by the human ear, provided a direct neural link between the sound stream and the auditory lobes, generating an apparently sourceless sensation of harmony, rhythm, cadence and melody uncontaminated by the noise and vibration of audible music. The re-scoring of the classical repertoire allowed the ultrasonic audience the best of both worlds. The majestic rhythms of Beethoven, the popular melodies of Tchaikovsky, the complex fugal elaborations of Bach, the abstract images of Schoenberg – all these were raised in frequency above the threshold of conscious audibility. Not only did they become inaudible, but the original works were re-scored for the much wider range of the ultrasonic orchestra, became richer in texture, more profound in theme, more sensitive, tender or lyrical as the ultrasonic arranger chose.

The first casualty in this change-over was the human voice. This alone of all instruments could not be re-scored, because its sounds were produced by non-mechanical means which the neurophonic engineer could never hope, or bother, to duplicate.

The earliest ultrasonic recordings had met with resistance, even ridicule. Radio programmes consisting of nothing but silence interrupted at half-hour intervals by commercial breaks seemed absurd. But gradually the public discovered that the silence was golden, that after leaving the radio switched to an ultrasonic channel for an hour or so a pleasant atmosphere of rhythm and melody seemed to generate itself spontaneously around them. When an announcer suddenly stated that an ultrasonic version of Mozart's Jupiter Symphony or Tchaikovsky's Pathétique had just been played the listener identified the real source.

A second advantage of ultrasonic music was that its frequencies were so high they left no resonating residues in solid structures, and consequently there was no need to call in the sound-sweep. After an audible performance of most symphonic music, walls and furniture throbbed for days with disintegrating residues that made the air seem leaden and tumid, an entire room virtually uninhabitable.

An immediate result was the swift collapse of all but a few symphony orchestras and opera companies. Concert halls and opera houses closed overnight. In the age of noise the tranquillizing balms of silence began to be rediscovered.

But the final triumph of ultrasonic music had come with a second development – the short-playing record, spinning at 900 r.p.m., which condensed the 45 minutes of a Beethoven symphony to 20 seconds of playing time, the three hours of a Wagner opera to little more than two minutes. Compact and cheap, SP records sacrificed nothing to brevity. One 30-second SP record delivered as much neurophonic pleasure as a natural length recording, but with deeper penetration, greater total impact.

Ultrasonic SP records swept all others off the market. Sonic LP records became museum pieces – only a crank would choose to listen to an audible full-length version of *Siegfried* or the *Barber of Seville* when he could have both wrapped up inaudibly inside the same five-minute package *and* appreciate their full musical value.

The heyday of Madame Gioconda was over. Unceremoniously left on the shelf, she had managed to survive for a few months vocalizing on radio commercials. Soon these too went ultrasonic. In a despairing act of revenge she bought out the radio station which fired her and made her home on one of the sound stages. Over the years the station became derelict and forgotten, its windows smashed, neon portico collapsing, aerials rusting. The huge eight-lane flyover built across it sealed it conclusively into the past.

Now Madame Gioconda proposed to win her way back at stiletto-point.

Mangon watched her impassively as she ranted on nastily in a cloud of purple cigarette smoke, a large seedy witch. The phenobarbitone was making her drowsy and her threats and ultimatums were becoming disjointed.

'. . . memoirs too, don't forget, Hector. Frank exposure, no holds barred. I mean . . . damn, have to get a ghost. Hotel de Paris at Monte, lots of pictures. Oh yes, I kept the photographs.' She grubbed about on the couch, came up with a crumpled soap coupon and a supermarket pay slip. 'Wait till those lawyers see them. Hector –' Suddenly she broke off, stared glassily at Mangon and sagged back.

Mangon waited until she was finally asleep, stood up and peered closely at her. She looked forlorn and desperate. He watched her reverently for a moment, then tiptoed to the rheostat mounted on the control panel behind the couch, damped down the lamp at Madame Gioconda's feet and left the stage.

He sealed the auditorium doors behind him, made his way down to the foyer and stepped out, sad but at the same time oddly exhilarated, into the cool midnight air. At last he accepted that he would have to act swiftly if he was to save Madame Gioconda.

TWO

Driving his sound truck into the city shortly after nine the next morning, Mangon decided to postpone his first call – the weird Neo-Corbusier Episcopalian Oratory sandwiched among the office blocks in the down-town financial sector – and instead turned west on Mainway and across the park towards the white-faced apartment batteries which reared up above the trees and lakes along the north side.

The Oratory was a difficult and laborious job that would take him three hours of concentrated effort. The Dean had recently imported some rare thirteenth-century pediments from the Church of St Francis at Assisi, beautiful sonic matrices rich with seven centuries of Gregorian chant, overlaid by the timeless tolling of the Angelus. Mounted into the altar they emanated an atmosphere resonant with litany and devotion, a mellow, deeply textured hymn that silently evoked the most sublime images of prayer and meditation.

But at 50,000 dollars each they also represented a terrifying hazard to the clumsy sound-sweep. Only two years earlier the entire north transept of Rheims Cathedral, rose window intact, purchased for a record 1,000,000 dollars and re-erected in the new Cathedral of St Joseph at San Diego, had been drained of its priceless heritage of tonal inlays by a squad of illiterate sound-sweeps who had misread their instructions and accidentally swept the wrong wall.

Even the most conscientious sound-sweep was limited by his skill, and Mangon, with his auditory super-sensitivity, was greatly in demand for his ability to sweep selectively, draining from the walls of the Oratory all extraneous and discordant noises – coughing, crying, the clatter of coins and mumble of prayer – leaving behind the chorales and liturgical chants which enhanced their devotional overtones. His skill alone would

lengthen the life of the Assisi pediments by twenty years; without him they would soon become contaminated by the miscellaneous traffic of the congregation. Consequently he had no fears that the Dean would complain if he failed to appear as usual that morning.

Halfway along the north side of the park he swung off into the forecourt of a huge forty-storey apartment block, a glittering white cliff ribbed by jutting balconies. Most of the apartments were Superlux duplexes occupied by showbusiness people. No one was about, but as Mangon entered the hallway, sonovac in one hand, the marble walls and columns buzzed softly with the echoing chatter of guests leaving parties four or five hours earlier.

In the elevator the residues were clearer – confident male tones, the sharp wheedling of querulous wives, soft negatives of amatory blondes, punctuated by countless repetitions of 'dahling'. Mangon ignored the echoes, which were almost inaudible, a dim insect hum. He grinned to himself as he rode up to the penthouse apartment; if Madame Gioconda had known his destination she would have strangled him on the spot.

Ray Alto, doyen of the ultrasonic composers and the man more than any other responsible for Madame Gioconda's decline, was one of Mangon's regular calls. Usually Mangon swept his apartment once a week, calling at three in the afternoon. Today, however, he wanted to make sure of finding Alto before he left for Video City, where he was a director of programme music.

The houseboy let him in. He crossed the hall and made his way down the black glass staircase into the sunken lounge. Wide studio windows revealed an elegant panorama of park and mid-town skyscrapers.

A white-slacked young man sitting on one of the long slab sofas – Paul Merrill, Alto's arranger – waved him back.

'Mangon, hold on to your dive breaks. I'm really on reheat this morning.' He twirled the ultrasonic trumpet he was playing, a tangle of stops and valves from which half a dozen leads trailed off across the cushions to a cathode tube and tone generator at the other end of the sofa.

Mangon sat down quietly and Merrill clamped the mouthpiece to his lips. Watching the ray tube intently, where he could check the shape of the ultrasonic notes, he launched into a brisk allegretto sequence, then quickened and flicked out a series of brilliant arpeggios, stripping off high P and Q notes that danced across the cathode screen like frantic eels, fantastic glissandos that raced up twenty octaves in as many seconds, each note distinct and symmetrically exact, tripping off the tone generator in turn so that escalators of electronic chords interweaved the original scale, a multi-channel melodic stream that crowded the cathode screen with exquisite, flickering patterns. The whole thing was inaudible, but the air around Mangon felt vibrant and accelerated, charged with gaiety and sparkle, and

he applauded generously when Merrill threw off a final dashing riff.

'*Flight of the Bumble Bee*,' Merrill told him. He tossed the trumpet aside and switched off the cathode tube. He lay back and savoured the glistening air for a moment. 'Well, how are things?'

Just then the door from one of the bedrooms opened and Ray Alto appeared, a tall, thoughtful man of about forty, with thinning blonde hair, wearing pale sunglasses over cool eyes.

'Hello, Mangon,' he said, running a hand over Mangon's head. 'You're early today. Full programme?' Mangon nodded. 'Don't let it get you down.' Alto picked a dictaphone off one of the end tables, carried it over to an armchair. 'Noise, noise, noise – the greatest single disease-vector of civilization. The whole world's rotting with it, yet all they can afford is a few people like Mangon fooling around with sonovacs. It's hard to believe that only a few years ago people completely failed to realize that sound left any residues.'

'Are we any better?' Merrill asked. 'This month's *Transonics* claims that eventually unswept sonic resonances will build up to a critical point where they'll literally start shaking buildings apart. The entire city will come down like Jericho.'

'Babel,' Alto corrected. 'Okay, now, let's shut up. We'll be gone soon, Mangon. Buy him a drink, would you, Paul.'

Merrill brought Mangon a coke from the bar, then wandered off. Alto flipped on the dictaphone, began to speak steadily into it. 'Memo 7: Betty, when does the copyright on Stravinsky lapse? Memo 8: Betty, file melody for projected nocturne: L, L sharp, BB, Y flat, Q, VT, L, L sharp. Memo 9: Paul, the bottom three octaves of the ultra-tuba are within the audible spectrum of the canine ear – congrats on that SP of the *Anvil Chorus* last night; about three million dogs thought the roof had fallen in on them. Memo 10: Betty –' He broke off, put down the microphone. 'Mangon, you look worried.'

Mangon, who had been lost in reverie, pulled himself together and shook his head.

'Working too hard?' Alto pressed. He scrutinized Mangon suspiciously. 'Are you still sitting up all night with that Gioconda woman?'

Embarrassed, Mangon lowered his eyes. His relationship with Alto was, obliquely, almost as close as that with Madame Gioconda. Although Alto was brusque and often irritable with Mangon, he took a sincere interest in his welfare. Possibly Mangon's muteness reminded him of the misanthropic motives behind his hatred of noise, made him feel indirectly responsible for the act of violence Mangon's mother had committed. Also, one artist to another, he respected Mangon's phenomenal auditory sensitivity.

'She'll exhaust you, Mangon, believe me.' Alto knew how much the personal contact meant to Mangon and hesitated to be over-critical. 'There's nothing you can do for her. Offering her sympathy merely fans her hopes for a come-back. She hasn't a chance.'

Mangon frowned, wrote quickly on his wrist-pad:

She WILL sing again!

Alto read the note pensively. Then, in a harder voice, he said: 'She's using you for her own purposes, Mangon. At present you satisfy one whim of hers – the neurotic headaches and fantasy applause. God forbid what the next whim might be.'

She is a great artist.

'She *was*,' Alto pointed out. 'No more, though, sad as it is. I'm afraid that the times change.'

Annoyed by this, Mangon gritted his teeth and tore off another sheet.

Entertainment, perhaps. Art, No!

Alto accepted the rebuke silently; he reproved himself as much as Mangon did for selling out to Video City. In his four years there his output of original ultrasonic music consisted of little more than one nearly finished symphony – aptly titled *Opus Zero* – shortly to receive its first performance, a few nocturnes and one quartet. Most of his energies went into programme music, prestige numbers for spectaculars and a mass of straight transcriptions of the classical repertoire. The last he particularly despised, fit work for Paul Merrill, but not for a responsible composer.

He added the sheet to the two in his left hand and asked: 'Have you ever heard Madame Gioconda sing?'

Mangon's answer came back scornfully:

No! But you have. Please describe.

Alto laughed shortly, tore up his sheets and walked across to the window.

'All right, Mangon, you've made your point. You're carrying a torch for art, doing your duty to one of the few perfect things the world has ever produced. I hope you're equal to the responsibility. La Gioconda might be quite a handful. Do you know that at one time the doors of Covent Garden, La Scala *and* the Met were closed to her? They said Callas had temperament, but she was a girl guide compared with Gioconda. Tell me, how is she? Eating enough?'

Mangon held up his coke bottle.

'Snow? That's tough. But how does she afford it?' He glanced at his watch. 'Dammit, I've got to leave. Clean this place out thoroughly, will you. It gives me a headache just listening to myself think.'

He started to pick up the dictaphone but Mangon was scribbling rapidly on his pad.

Give Madame Gioconda a job.

Alto read the note, then gave it back to Mangon, puzzled. 'Where? In this apartment?' Mangon shook his head. 'Do you mean at V.C.? *Singing?*' When Mangon began to nod vigorously he looked up at the ceiling with a despairing groan. 'For heaven's sake, Mangon, the last vocalist sang at Video City over ten years ago. No audience would stand for it. If I even suggested such an idea they'd tear my contract into a thousand pieces.' He shuddered, only half-playfully. 'I don't know about you, Mangon, but I've got my ulcer to support.'

He made his way to the staircase, but Mangon intercepted him, pencil flashing across the wrist-pad.

Please. Madame Gioconda will start blackmail soon. She is desperate. Must sing again. Could arrange make-believe programme in research studios. Closed circuit.

Alto folded the note carefully, left the dictaphone on the staircase and walked slowly back to the window.

'This blackmail. Are you absolutely sure? Who, though, do you know?' Mangon nodded, but looked away. 'Okay, I won't press you. LeGrande, probably, eh?' Mangon turned round in surprise, then gave an elaborate parody of a shrug.

'Hector LeGrande. Obvious guess. But there are no secrets there, it's all on open file. I suppose she's just threatening to make enough of an exhibition of herself to block his governorship.' Alto pursed his lips. He loathed LeGrande, not merely for having bribed him into a way of life he could never renounce, but also because, once having exploited his weakness, LeGrande never hesitated to remind Alto of it, treating him and his music with contempt. If Madame Gioconda's blackmail had the slightest hope of success he would have been only too happy, but he knew LeGrande would destroy her, probably take Mangon too.

Suddenly he felt a paradoxical sense of loyalty for Madame Gioconda. He looked at Mangon, waiting patiently, big spaniel eyes wide with hope.

'The idea of a closed circuit programme is insane. Even if we went to all the trouble of staging it she wouldn't be satisfied. She doesn't want to sing, she wants to be a *star*. It's the trappings of stardom she misses – the cheering galleries, the piles of bouquets, the green room parties. I could arrange a half-hour session on closed circuit with some trainee technicians – a few straight selections from *Tosca* and *Butterfly*, say, with even a sonic piano accompaniment, I'd be glad to play it myself – but I can't provide the gossip columns and theatre reviews. What would happen when she found out?'

She wants to SING.

Alto reached out and patted Mangon on the shoulder. 'Good for you. All right, then, I'll think about it. God knows how we'd arrange it. We'd have to tell her that she'll be making a surprise guest appearance on one of the big shows – that'll explain the absence of any programme announcement and we'll be able to keep her in an isolated studio. Stress the importance of surprise, to prevent her from contacting the newspapers . . . Where are you going?'

Mangon reached the staircase, picked up the dictaphone and returned to Alto with it. He grinned happily, his jaw working wildly as he struggled to speak. Strangled sounds quavered in his throat.

Touched, Alto turned away from him and sat down. 'Okay, Mangon,' he snapped brusquely, 'you can get on with your job. Remember, I haven't promised anything.' He flicked on the dictaphone, then began: 'Memo 11: Ray . . .'

THREE

It was just after four o'clock when Mangon braked the sound truck in the alley behind the derelict station. Overhead the traffic hammered along the flyover, dinning down on to the cobbled walls. He had been trying to finish his rounds early enough to bring Madame Gioconda the big news before her headaches began. He had swept out the Oratory in an hour, whirled through a couple of movie theatres, the Museum of Abstract Art, and a dozen private calls in half his usual time, driven by his almost overwhelming joy at having won a promise of help from Ray Alto.

He ran through the foyer, already fumbling at his wrist-pad. For the first time in many years he really regretted his muteness, his inability to tell Madame Gioconda orally of his triumph that morning.

Studio 2 was in darkness, the rows of seats and litter of old programmes and ice-cream cartons reflected dimly in the single light masked by the tall flats. His feet slipped in some shattered plaster fallen from the ceiling and he was out of breath when he clambered up on to the stage and swung round the nearest flat.

Madame Gioconda had gone!

The stage was deserted, the couch a rumpled mess, a clutter of cold saucepans on the stove. The wardrobe door was open, dresses wrenched outwards off their hangers.

For a moment Mangon panicked, unable to visualize why she should have left, immediately assuming that she had discovered his plot with Alto.

Then he realized that never before had he visited the studio until midnight at the earliest, and that Madame Gioconda had merely gone out to the supermarket. He smiled at his own stupidity and sat down on the couch to wait for her, sighing with relief.

As vivid as if they had been daubed in letters ten feet deep, the words leapt out from the walls, nearly deafening him with their force.

'You grotesque old witch, you must be insane! You ever threaten me again and I'll have you destroyed! LISTEN, you pathetic –'

Mangon spun round helplessly, trying to screen his ears. The words must have been hurled out in a paroxysm of abuse, they were only an hour old, vicious sonic scars slashed across the immaculately swept walls.

His first thought was to rush out for the sonovac and sweep the walls clear before Madame Gioconda returned. Then it dawned on him that she had already heard the original of the echoes – in the background he could just detect the muffled rhythms and intonations of her voice.

All too exactly, he could identify the man's voice.

He had heard it many times before, raging in the same ruthless tirades, when deputizing for one of the sound-sweeps, he had swept out the main boardroom at Video City.

Hector LeGrande! So Madame Gioconda had been more desperate than he thought.

The bottom drawer of the dressing table lay on the floor, its contents upended. Propped against the mirror was an old silver portrait frame, dull and verdigrised, some cotton wool and a tin of cleansing fluid next to it. The photograph was one of LeGrande, taken twenty years earlier. She must have known LeGrande was coming and had searched out the old portrait, probably regretting the threat of blackmail.

But the sentiment had not been shared.

Mangon walked round the stage, his heart knotting with rage, filling his ears with LeGrande's taunts. He picked up the portrait, pressed it between his palms, and suddenly smashed it across the edge of the dressing table.

'Mangon!'

The cry riveted him to the air. He dropped what was left of the frame, saw Madame Gioconda step quietly from behind one of the flats.

'Mangon, please,' she protested gently. 'You frighten me.' She sidled past him towards the bed, dismantling an enormous purple hat. 'And do clean up all that glass, or I shall cut my feet.'

She spoke drowsily and moved in a relaxed, sluggish way that Mangon first assumed indicated acute shock. Then she drew from her handbag six white vials and lined them up carefully on the bedside table. These were her favourite confectionery – so LeGrande had sweetened the pill with another cheque. Mangon began to scoop the glass together with his feet, at the same time trying to collect his wits. The sounds of LeGrande's abuse dinned the air, and he broke away and ran off to fetch the sonovac.

Madame Gioconda was sitting on the edge of the bed when he returned, dreamily dusting a small bottle of bourbon which had followed the cocaine vials out of the handbag. She hummed to herself melodically and stroked one of the feathers in her hat.

'Mangon,' she called when he had almost finished. 'Come here.'

Mangon put down the sonovac and went across to her.

She looked up at him, her eyes suddenly very steady. 'Mangon, why

did you break Hector's picture?' She held up a piece of the frame. 'Tell me.'

Mangon hesitated, then scribbled on his pad:

I am sorry. I adore you very much. He said such foul things to you.

Madame Gioconda glanced at the note, then gazed back thoughtfully at Mangon. 'Were you hiding here when Hector came?'

Mangon shook his head categorically. He started to write on his pad but Madame Gioconda restrained him.

'That's all right, dear. I thought not.' She looked around the stage for a moment, listening carefully. 'Mangon, when you came in could you hear what Mr LeGrande said?'

Mangon nodded. His eyes flickered to the obscene phrases on the walls and he began to frown. He still felt LeGrande's presence and his attempt to humiliate Madame Gioconda.

Madame Gioconda pointed around them. 'And you can actually hear what he said even now? How remarkable. Mangon, you have a wondrous talent.'

I am sorry you have to suffer so much.

Madame Gioconda smiled at this. 'We all have our crosses to bear. I have a feeling you may be able to lighten mine considerably.' She patted the bed beside her. 'Do sit down, you must be tired.' When he was settled she went on, 'I'm very interested, Mangon. Do you mean you can distinguish entire phrases and sentences in the sounds you sweep? You can hear complete conversations hours after they have taken place?'

Something about Madame Gioconda's curiosity made Mangon hesitate. His talent, so far as he knew, was unique, and he was not so naïve as to fail to appreciate its potentialities. It had developed in his late adolescence and so far he had resisted any temptation to abuse it. He had never revealed the talent to anyone, knowing that if he did his days as a sound-sweeper would be over.

Madame Gioconda was watching him, an expectant smile on her lips. Her thoughts, of course, were solely of revenge. Mangon listened again to the walls, focused on the abuse screaming out into the air.

Not complete conversations. Long fragments, up to twenty syllables. Depending on resonances and matrix. Tell no one. I will help you have revenge on LeGrande.

Madame Gioconda squeezed Mangon's hand. She was about to reach for the bourbon bottle when Mangon suddenly remembered the point of his visit. He leapt off the bed and started frantically scribbling on his wrist-pad.

He tore off the first sheet and pressed it into her startled hands, then filled three more, describing his encounter with the musical director at V.C., the latter's interest in Madame Gioconda and the conditional promise to arrange her guest appearance. In view of LeGrande's hostility he stressed the need for absolute secrecy.

He waited happily while Madame Gioconda read quickly through the notes, tracing out Mangon's child-like script with a long scarlet fingernail. When she finished he nodded his head rapidly and gestured triumphantly in the air.

Bemused, Madame Gioconda gazed uncomprehendingly at the notes. Then she reached out and pulled Mangon to her, taking his big faun-like head in her jewelled hands and pressing it to her lap.

'My dear child, how much I need you. You must never leave me now.'

As she stroked Mangon's hair her eyes roved questingly around the walls.

The miracle happened shortly before eleven o'clock the next morning.

After breakfast, sprawled across Madame Gioconda's bed with her scrapbooks, an old gramophone salvaged by Mangon from one of the studios playing operatic selections, they had decided to drive out to the stockades – the sound-sweeps left for the city at nine and they would be able to examine the sonic dumps unmolested. Having spent so much time with Madame Gioconda and immersed himself so deeply in her world, Mangon was eager now to introduce Madame Gioconda to his. The stockades, bleak though they might be, were all he had to show her.

For Mangon, Madame Gioconda had now become the entire universe, a source of certainty and wonder as potent as the sun. Behind him his past life fell away like the discarded chrysalis of a brilliant butterfly, the grey years of his childhood at the orphanage dissolving into the magical kaleidoscope that revolved around him. As she talked and murmured affectionately to him, the drab flats and props in the studio seemed as brightly coloured and meaningful as the landscape of a mescalin fantasy, the air tingling with a thousand vivid echoes of her voice.

They set off down F Street at ten, soon left behind the dingy warehouses and abandoned tenements that had enclosed Madame Gioconda for so long. Squeezed together in the driving-cab of the sound truck they looked an incongruous pair – the gangling Mangon, in zip-fronted yellow plastic jacket and yellow peaked cap, at the wheel, dwarfed by the vast flamboyant Madame Gioconda, wearing a parrot-green cartwheel hat and veil, her huge creamy breast glittering with pearls, gold stars and jewelled crescents, a small selection of the orders that had showered upon her in her heyday.

She had breakfasted well, on one of the vials and a tooth-glass of bourbon. As they left the city she gazed out amiably at the fields stretching away from the highway, and trilled out a light recitative from *Figaro*.

Mangon listened to her happily, glad to see her in such good form. Determined to spend every possible minute with Madame Gioconda, he had decided to abandon his calls for the day, if not for the next week and month. With her he at last felt completely secure. The pressure of her hand and the warm swell of her shoulder made him feel confident and invigorated, all the more proud that he was able to help her back to fame.

He tapped on the windshield as they swung off the highway on to the narrow dirt track that led towards the stockades. Here and there among the dunes they could see the low ruined outbuildings of the old explosives plant, the white galvanized iron roof of one of the sound-sweep's cabins. Desolate and unfrequented, the dunes ran on for miles. They passed the remains of a gateway that had collapsed to one side of the road; originally a continuous fence ringed the stockade, but no one had any reason for wanting to penetrate it. A place of strange echoes and festering silences, overhung by a gloomy miasma of a million compacted sounds, it remained remote and haunted, the graveyard of countless private babels.

The first of the sonic dumps appeared two or three hundred yards away on their right. This was reserved for aircraft sounds swept from the city's streets and municipal buildings, and was a tightly packed collection of sound-absorbent baffles covering several acres. The baffles were slightly larger than those in the other stockades; twenty feet high and fifteen wide, each supported by heavy wooden props, they faced each other in a random labyrinth of alleyways, like a store lot of advertisement hoardings. Only the top two or three feet were visible above the dunes, but the charged air hit Mangon like a hammer, a pounding niagara of airliners blaring down the glideway, the piercing whistle of jets jockeying at take-off, the ceaseless mind-sapping roar that hangs like a vast umbrella over any metropolitan complex.

All around, odd sounds shaken loose from the stockades were beginning to reach them. Over the entire area, fed from the dumps below, hung an unbroken phonic high, invisible but nonetheless as tangible and menacing as an enormous black thundercloud. Occasionally, when super-saturation was reached after one of the summer holiday periods, the sonic pressure fields would split and discharge, venting back into the stockades a nightmarish cataract of noise, raining on to the sound-sweeps not only the howling of cats and dogs, but the multi-lunged tumult of cars, express trains, fairgrounds and aircraft, the cacophonic *musique concrète* of civilization.

To Mangon the sounds reaching them, though scaled higher in the register, were still distinct, but Madame Gioconda could hear nothing and felt only an overpowering sense of depression and irritation. The air seemed to grate and rasp. Mangon noticed her beginning to frown and hold her hand to her forehead. He wound up his window and indicated to her to do the same. He switched on the sonovac mounted under the dashboard and let it drain the discordancies out of the sealed cabin.

Madame Gioconda relaxed in the sudden blissful silence. A little further on, when they passed another stockade set closer to the road, she turned to Mangon and began to say something to him.

Suddenly she jerked violently in alarm, her hat toppling. Her voice had frozen! Her mouth and lips moved frantically, but no sounds emerged. For a moment she was paralysed. Clutching her throat desperately, she filled her lungs and screamed.

A faint squeak piped out of her cavernous throat, and Mangon swung round in alarm to see her gibbering apoplectically, pointing helplessly to her throat.

He stared at her bewildered, then doubled over the wheel in a convulsion of silent laughter, slapping his thigh and thumping the dashboard. He pointed to the sonovac, then reached down and turned up the volume.

'. . . aaauuuoooh,' Madame Gioconda heard herself groan. She grasped her hat and secured it. 'Mangon, what a dirty trick, you should have warned me.'

Mangon grinned. The discordant sounds coming from the stockades began to fill the cabin again, and he turned down the volume. Gleefully, he scribbled on his wrist-pad:

Now you know what it is like!

Madame Gioconda opened her mouth to reply, then stopped in time, hiccuped and took his arm affectionately.

FOUR

Mangon slowed down as they approached a side road. Two hundred yards away on their left a small pink-washed cabin stood on a dune overlooking one of the stockades. They drove up to it, turned into a circular concrete apron below the cabin and backed up against one of the unloading bays, a battery of red-painted hydrants equipped with manifold gauges and release pipes running off into the stockade. This was only twenty feet away at its nearest point, a forest of door-shaped baffles facing each other in winding corridors, like a set from a surrealist film.

As she climbed down from the truck Madame Gioconda expected the same massive wave of depression and overload that she had felt from the stockade of aircraft noises, but instead the air seemed brittle and frenetic, darting with sudden flashes of tension and exhilaration.

As they walked up to the cabin Mangon explained:

Party noises – company for me.

The twenty or thirty baffles nearest the cabin he reserved for those

screening him from the miscellaneous chatter that filled the rest of the stockade. When he woke in the mornings he would listen to the laughter and small talk, enjoy the gossip and wisecracks as much as if he had been at the parties himself.

The cabin was a single room with a large window overlooking the stockade, well insulated from the hubbub below. Madame Gioconda showed only a cursory interest in Mangon's meagre belongings, and after a few general remarks came to the point and went over to the window. She opened it slightly, listened experimentally to the stream of atmospheric shifts that crowded past her.

She pointed to the cabin on the far side of the stockade. 'Mangon, whose is that?'

> *Gallagher's. My partner. He sweeps City Hall, University, V.C., big mansions on 5th and A. Working now.*

Madame Gioconda nodded and surveyed the stockade with interest. 'How fascinating. It's like a zoo. All that talk, talk, talk. And *you* can hear it all.' She snapped back her bracelets with swift decisive flicks of the wrist.

Mangon sat down on the bed. The cabin seemed small and dingy, and he was saddened by Madame Gioconda's disinterest. Having brought her all the way out to the dumps he wondered how he was going to keep her amused. Fortunately the stockade intrigued her. When she suggested a stroll through it he was only too glad to oblige.

Down at the unloading bay he demonstrated how he emptied the tanker, clipping the exhaust leads to the hydrant, regulating the pressure through the manifold and then pumping the sound away into the stockade.

Most of the stockade was in a continuous state of uproar, sounding something like a crowd in a football stadium, and as he led her out among the baffles he picked their way carefully through the quieter aisles. Around them voices chattered and whined fretfully, fragments of conversation drifted aimlessly over the air. Somewhere a woman pleaded in thin nervous tones, a man grumbled to himself, another swore angrily, a baby bellowed. Behind it all was the steady background murmur of countless TV programmes, the easy patter of announcers, the endless monotones of race-track commentators, the shrieking audiences of quiz shows, all pitched an octave up the scale so that they sounded an eerie parody of themselves.

A shot rang out in the next aisle, followed by screams and shouting. Although she heard nothing, the pressure pulse made Madame Gioconda stop.

'Mangon, wait. Don't be in so much of a hurry. Tell me what they're saying.'

Mangon selected a baffle and listened carefully. The sounds appeared

to come from an apartment over a launderette. A battery of washing machines chuntered to themselves, a cash register slammed interminably, there was a dim almost sub-threshold echo of 60-cycle hum from an SP record-player.

He shook his head, waved Madame Gioconda on.

'Mangon, what did they *say*?' she pestered him. He stopped again, sharpened his ears and waited. This time he was more lucky, an over-emotional female voice was gasping '. . . but if he finds you here he'll kill you, he'll kill us both, what shall we do . . .' He started to scribble down this outpouring, Madame Gioconda craning breathlessly over his shoulder, then recognized its source and screwed up the note.

'Mangon, for heaven's sake, what was it? Don't throw it away! Tell me!' She tried to climb under the wooden superstructure of the baffle to recover the note, but Mangon restrained her and quickly scribbled another message.

Adam and Eve. Sorry.

'What, the film? Oh, how ridiculous! Well, come on, try again.'

Eager to make amends, Mangon picked the next baffle, one of a group serving the staff married quarters of the University. Always a difficult job to keep clean, he struck paydirt almost at once.

'. . . my God, there's Bartok all over the place, that damned Steiner woman, I'll swear she's sleeping with her . . .'

Mangon took it all down, passing the sheets to Madame Gioconda as soon as he covered them. Squinting hard at his crabbed handwriting, she gobbled them eagerly, disappointed when, after half a dozen, he lost the thread and stopped.

'Go on, Mangon, what's the matter?' She let the notes fall to the ground. 'Difficult, isn't it. We'll have to teach you shorthand.'

They reached the baffles Mangon had just filled from the previous day's rounds. Listening carefully he heard Paul Merrill's voice: '. . . month's *Transonics* claims that . . . the entire city will come down like Jericho.'

He wondered if he could persuade Madame Gioconda to wait for fifteen minutes, when he would be able to repeat a few carefully edited fragments from Alto's promise to arrange her guest appearance, but she seemed eager to move deeper into the stockade.

'You said your friend Gallagher sweeps out Video City, Mangon. Where would that be?'

Hector LeGrande. Of course, Mangon realized, why had he been so obtuse. This was the chance to pay the man back.

He pointed to an area a few aisles away. They climbed between the baffles, Mangon helping Madame Gioconda over the beams and props, steering her full skirt and wide hat brim away from splinters and rusted metalwork.

* * *

The task of finding LeGrande was simple. Even before the baffles were in sight Mangon could hear the hard, unyielding bite of the tycoon's voice, dominating every other sound from the Video City area. Gallagher in fact swept only the senior dozen or so executive suites at V.C., chiefly to relieve their occupants of the distasteful echoes of LeGrande's voice.

Mangon steered their way among these, searching for LeGrande's master suite, where anything of a really confidential nature took place.

There were about twenty baffles, throwing off an unending chorus of 'Yes, H.L.', 'Thanks, H.L.', 'Brilliant, H.L.' Two or three seemed strangely quiet, and he drew Madame Gioconda over to them.

This was LeGrande with his personal secretary and PA. He took out his pencil and focused carefully.

'. . . of Third National Bank, transfer two million to private holding and threaten claim for stock depreciation . . . redraft escape clauses, including non-liability purchase benefits . . .'

Madame Gioconda tapped his arm but he gestured her away. Most of the baffle appeared to be taken up by dubious financial dealings, but nothing that would really hurt LeGrande if revealed.

Then he heard –

'. . . Bermuda Hilton. Private Island, with anchorage, have the beach cleaned up, last time the water was full of fish . . . I don't care, poison them, hang some nets out . . . Imogene will fly in from Idlewild as Mrs Edna Burgess, warn Customs to stay away . . .'

'. . . call Cartiers, something for the Contessa, 17 carats say, ceiling of ten thousand. No, make it eight thousand . . .'

'. . . hat-check girl at the Tropicabana. Usual dossier . . .'

Mangon scribbled furiously, but LeGrande was speaking at rapid dictation speed and he could get down only a few fragments. Madame Gioconda barely deciphered his handwriting, and became more and more frustrated as her appetite was whetted. Finally she flung away the notes in a fury of exasperation.

'This is absurd, you're missing everything!' she cried. She pounded on one of the baffles, then broke down and began to sob angrily. 'Oh God, God, *God,* how ridiculous! Help me, I'm going insane . . .'

Mangon hurried across to her, put his arms round her shoulders to support her. She pushed him away irritably, railing at herself to discharge her impatience. 'It's useless, Mangon, it's stupid of me, I was a fool –'

'STOP!'

The cry split the air like the blade of a guillotine.

They both straightened, stared at each other blankly. Mangon put his fingers slowly to his lips, then reached out tremulously and put his hands in Madame Gioconda's. Somewhere within him a tremendous tension had begun to dissolve.

'Stop,' he said again in a rough but quiet voice. 'Don't cry. I'll help you.'

Madame Gioconda gaped at him with amazement. Then she let out a tremendous whoop of triumph.

'Mangon, you can talk! You've got your voice back! It's absolutely astounding! Say something, quickly, for heaven's sake!'

Mangon felt his mouth again, ran his fingers rapidly over his throat. He began to tremble with excitement, his face brightened, he jumped up and down like a child.

'I can talk,' he repeated wonderingly. His voice was gruff, then seesawed into a treble. 'I can talk,' he said louder, controlling its pitch. 'I can talk, I can talk, *I can talk*!' He flung his head back, let out an ear-shattering shout. 'I CAN TALK! HEAR ME!' He ripped the wrist-pad off his sleeve, hurled it away over the baffles.

Madame Gioconda backed away, laughing agreeably. 'We can hear you, Mangon. Dear me, how sweet.' She watched Mangon thoughtfully as he cavorted happily in the narrow interval between the aisles. 'Now don't tire yourself out or you'll lose it again.'

Mangon danced over to her, seized her shoulders and squeezed them tightly. He suddenly realized that he knew no diminutive or Christian name for her.

'Madame Gioconda,' he said earnestly, stumbling over the syllables, the words that were so simple yet so enormously complex to pronounce. 'You gave me back my voice. Anything you want –' He broke off, stuttering happily, laughing through his tears. Suddenly he buried his head in her shoulder, exhausted by his discovery, and cried gratefully, 'It's a *wonderful* voice.'

Madame Gioconda steadied him maternally. 'Yes, Mangon,' she said, her eyes on the discarded notes lying in the dust. 'You've got a wonderful voice, all right.' *Sotto voce*, she added: 'But your hearing is even more wonderful.'

Paul Merrill switched off the SP player, sat down on the arm of the sofa and watched Mangon quizzically.

'Strange. You know, my guess is that it was psychosomatic.'

Mangon grinned. 'Psychosemantic,' he repeated, garbling the word half-deliberately. 'Clever. You can do amazing things with words. They help to crystallize the truth.'

Merrill groaned playfully. 'God, you sit there, you drink your coke, you philosophize. Don't you realize you're supposed to stand quietly in a corner, positively dumb with gratitude? Now you're even ramming your puns down my throat. Never mind, tell me again how it happened.'

'Once a pun a time –' Mangon ducked the magazine Merrill flung at him, let out a loud 'Olé!'

For the last two weeks he had been *en fête*.

Every day he and Madame Gioconda followed the same routine; after breakfast at the studio they drove out to the stockade, spent two or three hours compiling their confidential file on LeGrande, lunched at the cabin

and then drove back to the city, Mangon going off on his rounds while Madame Gioconda slept until he returned shortly before midnight. For Mangon their existence was idyllic; not only was he rediscovering himself in terms of the complex spectra and patterns of speech – a completely new category of existence – but at the same time his relationship with Madame Gioconda revealed areas of sympathy, affection and understanding that he had never previously seen. If he sometimes felt that he was too preoccupied with his side of their relationship and the extraordinary benefits it had brought him, at least Madame Gioconda had been equally well served. Her headaches and mysterious phantoms had gone, she had cleaned up the studio and begun to salvage a little dignity and self-confidence, which made her single-minded sense of ambition seem less obsessive. Psychologically, she needed Mangon less now than he needed her, and he was sensible to restrain his high spirits and give her plenty of attention. During the first week Mangon's incessant chatter had been rather wearing, and once, on their way to the stockade, she had switched on the sonovac in the driving-cab and left Mangon mouthing silently at the air like a stranded fish. He had taken the hint.

'What about the sound-sweeping?' Merrill asked. 'Will you give it up?'

Mangon shrugged. 'It's my talent, but living at the stockade, let in at back doors, cleaning up the verbal garbage – it's a degraded job. I want to help Madame Gioconda. She will need a secretary when she starts to go on tour.'

Merrill shook his head warily. 'You're awfully sure there's going to be a sonic revival, Mangon. Every sign is against it.'

'They have not heard Madame Gioconda sing. Believe me, I know the power and wonder of the human voice. Ultrasonic music is great for atmosphere, but it has no content. It can't express ideas, only emotions.'

'What happened to that closed circuit programme you and Ray were going to put on for her?'

'It – fell through,' Mangon lied. The circuits Madame Gioconda would perform on would be open to the world. He had told them nothing of the visits to the stockade, of his power to read the baffles, of the accumulating file on LeGrande. Soon Madame Gioconda would strike.

Above them in the hallway a door slammed, someone stormed through into the apartment in a tempest, kicking a chair against a wall. It was Alto. He raced down the staircase into the lounge, jaw tense, fingers flexing angrily.

'Paul, don't interrupt me until I've finished,' he snapped, racing past without looking at them. 'You'll be out of a job but I warn you, if you don't back me up one hundred per cent I'll shoot you. That goes for you too, Mangon, I need you in on this.' He whirled over to the window, bolted out the traffic noises below, then swung back and watched them steadily, feet planted firmly in the carpet. For the first

time in the three years Mangon had known him he looked aggressive and confident.

'Headline,' he announced. 'The Gioconda is to sing again! Incredible and terrifying though the prospect may seem, exactly two weeks from now the live, uncensored voice of the Gioconda will go out coast to coast on all three V.C. radio channels. Surprised, Mangon? It's no secret, they're printing the bills right now. Eight-thirty to nine-thirty, right up on the peak, even if they have to give the time away.'

Merrill sat forward. 'Bully for her. If LeGrande wants to drive the whole ship into the ground, why worry?'

Alto punched the sofa viciously. 'Because you and I are going to be on board! Didn't you hear me? Eight-thirty, a fortnight today! *We* have a programme on then. Well, guess who our guest star is?'

Merrill struggled to make sense of this. 'Wait a minute, Ray. You mean she's actually going to appear – she's going to *sing* – in the middle of *Opus Zero*?' Alto nodded grimly. Merrill threw up his hands and slumped back. 'It's crazy, she can't. Who says she will?'

'Who do you think? The great LeGrande.' Alto turned to Mangon. 'She must have raked up some real dirt to frighten him into this. I can hardly believe it.'

'But why on *Opus Zero*?' Merrill pressed. 'Let's switch the première to the week after.'

'Paul, you're missing the point. Let me fill you in. Sometime yesterday Madame Gioconda paid a private call on LeGrande. Something she told him persuaded him that it would be absolutely wonderful for her to have a whole hour to herself on one of the feature music programmes, singing a few old-fashioned songs from the old-fashioned shows, with a full-scale ultrasonic backing. Eager to give her a completely free hand he even asked her which of the regular programmes she'd like. Well, as the last show she appeared on ten years ago was cancelled to make way for Ray Alto's *Total Symphony* you can guess which one she picked.'

Merrill nodded. 'It all fits together. We're broadcasting from the concert studio. A single ultrasonic symphony, no station breaks, not even a commentary. Your first world première in three years. There'll be a big invited audience. White tie, something like the old days. Revenge is sweet.' He shook his head sadly. 'Hell, all that work.'

Alto snapped: 'Don't worry, it won't be wasted. Why should we pay the bill for LeGrande? This symphony is the one piece of serious music I've written since I joined V.C. and it isn't going to be ruined.' He went over to Mangon, sat down next to him. 'This afternoon I went down to the rehearsal studios. They'd found an ancient sonic grand somewhere and one of the old-timers was accompanying her. Mangon, it's ten years since she sang last. If she'd practised for two or three hours a day she might have preserved her voice, but you sweep her radio station, you know she hasn't sung a note. She's an old woman now. What time alone hasn't done to her, cocaine and self-pity have.' He paused, watching Mangon

searchingly. 'I hate to say it, Mangon, but it sounded like a cat being strangled.'

You lie, Mangon thought icily. *You are simply so ignorant, your taste in music is so debased, that you are unable to recognize real genius when you see it.* He looked at Alto with contempt, sorry for the man, with his absurd silent symphonies. He felt like shouting: *I know what silence is! The voice of the Gioconda is a stream of gold, molten and pure, she will find it again as I found mine.* However, something about Alto's manner warned him to wait.

He said: 'I understand.' Then: 'What do you want me to do?'

Alto patted him on the shoulder. 'Good boy. Believe me, you'll be helping her in the long run. What I propose will save all of us from looking foolish. We've got to stand up to LeGrande, even if it means a one-way ticket out of V.C. Okay, Paul?' Merrill nodded firmly and he went on: 'Orchestra will continue as scheduled. According to the programme Madame Gioconda will be singing to an accompaniment by *Opus Zero*, but that means nothing and there'll be no connection at any point. In fact she won't turn up until the night itself. She'll stand well down-stage on a special platform, and the only microphone will be an aerial about twenty feet diagonally above her. It will be live – *but her voice will never reach it.* Because you, Mangon, will be in the cue-box directly in front of her, with the most powerful sonovac we can lay our hands on. As soon as she opens her mouth you'll let her have it. She'll be at least ten feet away from you so she'll hear herself and won't suspect what is happening.'

'What about the audience?' Merrill asked.

'They'll be listening to my symphony, enjoying a neurophonic experience of sufficient beauty and power, I hope, to distract them from the sight of a blowzy *prima donna* gesturing to herself in a cocaine fog. They'll probably think she's conducting. Remember, they may be expecting her to sing but how many people still know what the word really means? Most of them will assume it's ultrasonic.'

'And LeGrande?'

'He'll be in Bermuda. Business conference.'

FIVE

Madame Gioconda was sitting before her dressing-table mirror, painting on a face like a Hallowe'en mask. Beside her the gramophone played scratchy sonic selections from *Traviata*. The stage was still a disorganized jumble, but there was now an air of purpose about it.

Making his way through the flats, Mangon walked up to her quietly and kissed her bare shoulder. She stood up with a flourish, an enormous monument of a woman in a magnificent black silk dress sparkling with thousands of sequins.

'Thank you, Mangon,' she sang out when he complimented her. She

swirled off to a hat-box on the bed, pulled out a huge peacock feather and stabbed it into her hair.

Mangon had come round at six, several hours before usual; over the past two days he had felt increasingly uneasy. He was convinced that Alto was in error, and yet logic was firmly on his side. Could Madame Gioconda's voice have preserved itself? Her spoken voice, unless she was being particularly sweet, was harsh and uneven, recently even more so. He assumed that with only a week to her performance nervousness was making her irritable.

Again she was going out, as she had done almost every night. With whom, she never explained; probably to the theatre restaurants, to renew contacts with agents and managers. He would have liked to go with her, but he felt out of place on this plane of Madame Gioconda's existence.

'Mangon, I won't be back until very late,' she warned him. 'You look rather tired and pasty. You'd better go home and get some sleep.'

Mangon noticed he was still wearing his yellow peaked cap. Unconsciously he must already have known he would not be spending the night there.

'Do you want to go to the stockade tomorrow?' he asked.

'Hmmmh . . . I don't think so. It gives me rather a headache. Let's leave it for a day or two.'

She turned on him with a tremendous smile, her eyes glittering with sudden affection.

'Goodbye, Mangon, it's been wonderful to see you.' She bent down and pressed her cheek maternally to his, engulfing him in a heady wave of powder and perfume. In an instant all his doubts and worries evaporated, he looked forward to seeing her the next day, certain that they would spend the future together.

For half an hour after she had gone he wandered around the deserted sound stage, going through his memories. Then he made his way out to the alley and drove back to the stockade.

As the day of Madame Gioconda's performance drew closer Mangon's anxieties mounted. Twice he had been down to the concert studio at Video City, had rehearsed with Alto his entry beneath the stage to the cue-box, a small compartment off the corridor used by the electronics engineers. They had checked the power points, borrowed a sonovac from the services section – a heavy duty model used for shielding VIPs and commentators at airports – and mounted its nozzle in the cue-hood.

Alto stood on the platform erected for Madame Gioconda, shouted at the top of his voice at Merrill sitting in the third row of the stalls.

'Hear anything?' he called afterwards.

Merrill shook his head. 'Nothing, no vibration at all.'

Down below Mangon flicked the release toggle, vented a long-drawn-out 'Fiivvveeee! . . . Foouuurrr! . . . Thrreeeee! . . . Twooooo! . . . Onnneeee . . . !'

'Good enough,' Alto decided. Chicago-style, they hid the sonovac in a triple-bass case, stored it in Alto's office.

'Do you want to hear her sing, Mangon?' Alto asked. 'She should be rehearsing now.'

Mangon hesitated, then declined.

'It's tragic that she's unable to realize the truth herself,' Alto commented. 'Her mind must be fixed fifteen or twenty years in the past, when she sang her greatest roles at La Scala. That's the voice she hears, the voice she'll probably always hear.'

Mangon pondered this. Once he tried to ask Madame Gioconda how her practice sessions were going, but she was moving into a different zone and answered with some grandiose remark. He was seeing less and less of her, whenever he visited the station she was either about to go out or else tired and eager to be rid of him. Their trips to the stockade had ceased. All this he accepted as inevitable; after the performance, he assured himself, after her triumph, she would come back to him.

He noticed, however, that he was beginning to stutter.

On the final afternoon, a few hours before the performance that evening, Mangon drove down to F Street for what was to be the last time. He had not seen Madame Gioconda the previous day and he wanted to be with her and give her any encouragement she needed.

As he turned into the alley he was surprised to see two large removal vans parked outside the station entrance. Four or five men were carrying out pieces of furniture and the great scenic flats from the sound stage.

Mangon ran over to them. One of the vans was full; he recognized all Madame Gioconda's possessions – the rococo wardrobe and dressing table, the couch, the huge Desdemona bed, up-ended and wrapped in corrugated paper – as he looked at it he felt that a section of himself had been torn from him and rammed away callously. In the bright daylight the peeling threadbare flats had lost all illusion of reality; with them Mangon's whole relationship with Madame Gioconda seemed to have been dismantled.

The last of the workmen came out with a gold cushion under his arm, tossed it into the second van. The foreman sealed the doors and waved on the driver.

'W . . . wh . . . where are you going?' Mangon asked him urgently.

The foreman looked him up and down. 'You're the sweeper, are you?' He jerked a thumb towards the station. 'The old girl said there was a message for you in there. Couldn't see one myself.'

Mangon left him and ran into the foyer and up the stairway towards Studio 2. The removers had torn down the blinds and a grey light was flooding into the dusty auditorium. Without the flats the stage looked exposed and derelict.

He raced down the aisle, wondering why Madame Gioconda had decided to leave without telling him.

The stage had been stripped. The music stands had been kicked over, the stove lay on its side with two or three old pans around it, underfoot there was a miscellaneous litter of paper, ash and empty vials.

Mangon searched around for the message, probably pinned to one of the partitions.

Then he heard it screaming at him from the walls, violent and concise.

'GO AWAY YOU UGLY CHILD! NEVER TRY TO SEE ME AGAIN!'

He shrank back, involuntarily tried to shout as the walls seemed to fall in on him, but his throat had frozen.

As he entered the corridor below the stage shortly before eight-twenty, Mangon could hear the sounds of the audience arriving and making their way to their seats. The studio was almost full, a hubbub of well-heeled chatter. Lights flashed on and off in the corridor, and oblique atmospheric shifts cut through the air as the players on the stage tuned their instruments.

Mangon slid past the technicians manning the neurophonic rigs which supplied the orchestra, trying to make the enormous triple-bass case as inconspicuous as possible. They were all busy checking the relays and circuits, and he reached the cue-box and slipped through the door unnoticed.

The box was almost in darkness, a few rays of coloured light filtering through the pink and white petals of the chrysanthemums stacked over the hood. He bolted the door, then opened the case, lifted out the sonovac and clipped the snout into the canister. Leaning forward, with his hands he pushed a small aperture among the flowers.

Directly in front of him he could see a velvet-lined platform, equipped with a white metal rail to the centre of which a large floral ribbon had been tied. Beyond was the orchestra, disposed in a semicircle, each of the twenty members sitting at a small box-like desk on which rested his instrument, tone generator and cathode tube. They were all present, and the light reflected from the ray screens threw a vivid phosphorescent glow on to the silver wall behind them.

Mangon propped the nozzle of the sonovac into the aperture, bent down, plugged in the lead and switched on.

Just before eight-twenty-five someone stepped across the platform and paused in front of the cue-hood. Mangon crouched back, watching the patent leather shoes and black trousers move near the nozzle.

'Mangon!' he heard Alto snap. He craned forward, saw Alto eyeing him. Mangon waved to him and Alto nodded slowly, at the same time smiling to someone in the audience, then turned on his heel and took his place in the orchestra.

At eight-thirty a sequence of red and green lights signalled the start of the programme. The audience quietened, waiting while an announcer in an off-stage booth introduced the programme.

A compère appeared on stage, standing behind the cue-hood, and addressed the audience. Mangon sat quietly on the small wooden seat fastened to the wall, staring blankly at the canister of the sonovac. There was a round of applause, and a steady green light shone downwards through the flowers. The air in the cue-box began to sweeten, a cool motionless breeze eddied vertically around him as a rhythmic ultrasonic pressure wave pulsed past. It relaxed the confined dimensions of the box, with a strange mesmeric echo that held his attention. Somewhere in his mind he realized that the symphony had started, but he was too distracted to pull himself together and listen to it consciously.

Suddenly, through the gap between the flowers and the sonovac nozzle, he saw a large white mass shifting about on the platform. He slipped off the seat and peered up.

Madame Gioconda had taken her place on the platform. Seen from below she seemed enormous, a towering cataract of glistening white satin that swept down to her feet. Her arms were folded loosely in front of her, fingers flashing with blue and white stones. He could only just glimpse her face, the terrifying witch-like mask turned in profile as she waited for some off-stage signal.

Mangon mobilized himself, slid his hand down to the trigger of the sonovac. He waited, feeling the steady subliminal music of Alto's symphony swell massively within him, its tempo accelerating. Presumably Madame Gioconda's arranger was waiting for a climax at which to introduce her first aria.

Abruptly Madame Gioconda looked forward at the audience and took a short step to the rail. Her hands parted and opened palms upward, her head moved back, her bare shoulders swelled.

The wave front pulsing through the cue-box stopped, then soared off in a continuous unbroken crescendo. At the same time Madame Gioconda thrust her head out, her throat muscles contracted powerfully.

As the sound burst from her throat Mangon's finger locked rigidly against the trigger guard. An instant later, before he could think, a shattering blast of sound ripped through his ears, followed by a slightly higher note that appeared to strike a hidden ridge half-way along its path, wavered slightly, then recovered and sped on, like an express train crossing lines.

Mangon listened to her numbly, hands gripping the barrel of the sonovac. The voice exploded in his brain, flooding every nexus of cells with its violence. It was grotesque, an insane parody of a classical soprano. Harmony, purity, cadence had gone. Rough and cracked, it jerked sharply from one high note to a lower, its breath intervals uncontrolled, sudden precipices of gasping silence which plunged through the volcanic torrent, dividing it into a loosely connected sequence of *bravura* passages.

He barely recognized what she was singing: the Toreador song from *Carmen*. Why she had picked this he could not imagine. Unable to reach its higher notes she fell back on the swinging rhythm of the refrain,

hammering out the rolling phrases with tosses of her head. After a dozen bars her pace slackened, she slipped into an extempore humming, then broke out of this into a final climactic assault.

Appalled, Mangon watched as two or three members of the orchestra stood up and disappeared into the wings. The others had stopped playing, were switching off their instruments and conferring with each other. The audience was obviously restive; Mangon could hear individual voices in the intervals when Madame Gioconda refilled her lungs.

Behind him someone hammered on the door. Startled, Mangon nearly tripped across the sonovac. Then he bent down and wrenched the plug out of its socket. Snapping open the two catches beneath the chassis of the sonovac, he pulled off the canister to reveal the valves, amplifier and generator. He slipped his fingers carefully through the leads and coils, seized them as firmly as he could and ripped them out with a single motion. Tearing his nails, he stripped the printed circuit off the bottom of the chassis and crushed it between his hands.

Satisfied, he dropped the sonovac to the floor, listened for a moment to the caterwauling above, which was now being drowned by the mounting vocal opposition of the audience, then unlatched the door.

Paul Merrill, his bow tie askew, burst in. He gaped blankly at Mangon, at the blood dripping from his fingers and the smashed sonovac on the floor.

He seized Mangon by the shoulders, shook him roughly. 'Mangon, are you crazy? What are you trying to do?'

Mangon attempted to say something, but his voice had died. He pulled himself away from Merrill, pushed past into the corridor.

Merrill shouted after him. 'Mangon, help me fix this! Where are you going?' He got down on his knees, started trying to piece the sonovac together.

From the wings Mangon briefly watched the scene on the stage.

Madame Gioconda was still singing, her voice completely inaudible in the uproar from the auditorium. Half the audience were on their feet, shouting towards the stage and apparently remonstrating with the studio officials. All but a few members of the orchestra had left their instruments, these sitting on their desks and watching Madame Gioconda in amazement.

The programme director, Alto and one of the compères stood in front of her, banging on the rail and trying to attract her attention. But Madame Gioconda failed to notice them. Head back, eyes on the brilliant ceiling lights, hands gesturing majestically, she soared along the private causeways of sound that poured unrelentingly from her throat, a great white angel of discord on her homeward flight.

Mangon watched her sadly, then slipped away through the stage-hands pressing around him. As he left the theatre by the stage door a small crowd was gathering by the main entrance. He flicked away the blood from his fingers, then bound his handkerchief round them.

He walked down the side street to where the sound truck was parked,

climbed into the cab and sat still for a few minutes looking out at the bright evening lights in the bars and shopfronts.

Opening the dashboard locker, he hunted through it and pulled out an old wrist-pad, clipped it into his sleeve.

In his ears the sounds of Madame Gioconda singing echoed like an insane banshee.

He switched on the sonovac under the dashboard, turned it full on, then started the engine and drove off into the night.

1960

ZONE OF TERROR

Larsen had been waiting all day for Bayliss, the psychologist who lived in the next chalet, to pay the call he had promised on the previous evening. Characteristically, Bayliss had made no precise arrangements as regards time; a tall, moody man with an off-hand manner, he had merely gestured vaguely with his hypodermic and mumbled something about the following day: he would look in, probably. Larsen knew damned well he would look in, the case was too interesting to miss. In an oblique way it meant as much to Bayliss as it did to himself.

Except that it was Larsen who had to do the worrying – by three that afternoon Bayliss had still not materialized. What was he doing except sitting in his white-walled, air-conditioned lounge, playing Bartok quartets on the stereogram? Meanwhile Larsen had nothing to do but roam around the chalet, slamming impatiently from one room to the next like a tiger with an anxiety neurosis, and cook up a quick lunch (coffee and three amphetamines, from a private cache Bayliss as yet only dimly suspected. God, he needed the stimulants after those massive barbiturate shots Bayliss had pumped into him after the attack). He tried to settle down with Kretschmer's *An Analysis of Psychotic Time*, a heavy tome, full of graphs and tabular material, which Bayliss had insisted he read, asserting that it filled in necessary background to the case. Larsen had spent a couple of hours on it, but so far he had got no further than the preface to the third edition.

Periodically he went over to the window and peered through the plastic blind for any signs of movement in the next chalet. Beyond, the desert lay in the sunlight like an enormous bone, against which the aztec-red fins of Bayliss's Pontiac flared like the tail feathers of a flamboyant phoenix. The remaining three chalets were empty; the complex was operated by the electronics company for which he and Bayliss worked as a sort of 're-creational' centre for senior executives and tired 'think-men'. The desert site had been chosen for its hypotensive virtues, its supposed equivalence to psychic zero. Two or three days of leisurely reading, of watching the motionless horizon, and tension and anxiety thresholds rose to more useful levels.

However, two days there, Larsen reflected, and he had very nearly gone mad. It was lucky Bayliss had been around with his hypodermic. Though

the man was certainly casual when it came to supervising his patients; he left them to their own resources. In fact, looking back, he – Larsen – had been responsible for just about all the diagnosis. Bayliss had done little more than thumb his hypo, toss Kretschmer into his lap, and offer some cogitating asides.

Perhaps he was waiting for something?

Larsen tried to decide whether to phone Bayliss on some pretext; his number – O, on the internal system – was almost too inviting. Then he heard a door clatter outside, and saw the tall, angular figure of the psychologist crossing the concrete apron between the chalets, head bowed pensively in the sharp sunlight.

Where's his case, Larsen thought, almost disappointed. Don't tell me he's putting on the barbiturate brakes. Maybe he'll try hypnosis. Masses of post-hypnotic suggestions, in the middle of shaving I'll suddenly stand on my head.

He let Bayliss in, fidgeting around him as they went into the lounge.

'Where the hell have you been?' he asked. 'Do you realize it's nearly four?'

Bayliss sat down at the miniature executive desk in the middle of the lounge and looked round critically, a ploy Larsen resented but never managed to anticipate.

'Of course I realize it. I'm fully wired for time. How have you felt today?' He pointed to the straight-backed chair placed in the interviewee's position. 'Sit down and try to relax.'

Larsen gestured irritably. 'How can I relax while I'm just hanging around here, waiting for the next bomb to go off?' He began his analysis of the past twenty-four hours, a task he enjoyed, larding the case history with liberal doses of speculative commentary.

'Actually, last night was easier. I think I'm entering a new zone. Everything's beginning to stabilize, I'm not looking over my shoulder all the time. I've left the inside doors open, and before I enter a room I deliberately anticipate it, try to extrapolate its depth and dimensions so that it doesn't *surprise* me – before I used to open a door and just dive through like a man stepping into an empty lift shaft.'

Larsen paced up and down, cracking his knuckles. Eyes half closed, Bayliss watched him. 'I'm pretty sure there won't be another attack,' Larsen continued. 'In fact, the best thing is probably for me to get straight back to the plant. After all, there's no point in sitting around here indefinitely. I feel more or less completely okay.'

Bayliss nodded. 'In that case, then, why are you so jumpy?'

Exasperated, Larsen clenched his fists. He could almost hear the artery thudding in his temple. 'I'm *not* jumpy! For God's sake, Bayliss, I thought the advanced view was that psychiatrist and patient shared the illness together, forgot their own identities and took equal responsibility. You're trying to evade –'

'I am not,' Bayliss cut in firmly. 'I accept complete responsibility for

you. That's why I want you to stay here until you've come to terms with this thing.'

Larsen snorted. '"Thing"! Now you're trying to make it sound like something out of a horror film. All I had was a simple hallucination. And I'm not even completely convinced it was that.' He pointed through the window. 'Suddenly opening the garage door in that bright sunlight – it might have been a shadow.'

'You described it pretty exactly,' Bayliss commented. 'Colour of the hair, moustache, the clothes he wore.'

'Back projection. The detail in dreams is authentic too.' Larsen moved the chair out of the way and leaned forwards across the desk. 'Another thing. I don't feel you're being entirely frank.'

Their eyes levelled. Bayliss studied Larsen carefully for a moment, noticing his widely dilated pupils.

'Well?' Larsen pressed.

Bayliss buttoned his jacket and walked across to the door. 'I'll call in tomorrow. Meanwhile try to unwind yourself a little. I'm not trying to alarm you, Larsen, but this problem may be rather more complicated than you imagine.' He nodded, then slipped out before Larsen could reply.

Larsen stepped over to the window and through the blind watched the psychologist disappear into his chalet. Disturbed for a moment, the sunlight again settled itself heavily over everything. A few minutes later the sounds of one of the Bartok quartets whined fretfully across the apron.

Larsen went back to the desk and sat down, elbows thrust forward aggressively. Bayliss irritated him, with his neurotic music and inaccurate diagnoses. He felt tempted to climb straight into his car and drive back to the plant. Strictly speaking, though, the psychologist outranked Larsen, and probably had executive authority over him while he was at the chalet, particularly as the five days he had spent there were on the company's time.

He gazed round the silent lounge, tracing the cool horizontal shadows that dappled the walls, listening to the low soothing hum of the air-conditioner. His argument with Bayliss had refreshed him and he felt composed and confident. Yet residues of tension and uneasiness still existed, and he found it difficult to keep his eyes off the open doors to the bedroom and kitchen.

He had arrived at the chalet five days earlier, exhausted and overwrought, on the verge of a total nervous collapse. For three months he had been working without a break on programming the complex circuitry of a huge brain simulator which the company's Advanced Designs Division were building for one of the major psychiatric foundations. This was a complete electronic replica of the central nervous system, each spinal level represented by a single computer, other computers holding memory banks in which sleep, tension, aggression and other psychic functions were coded and stored, building blocks that could be played into the CNS simulator

to construct models of dissociation states and withdrawal syndromes – any psychic complex on demand.

The design teams working on the simulator had been watched vigilantly by Bayliss and his assistants, and the weekly tests had revealed the mounting load of fatigue that Larsen was carrying. Finally Bayliss had pulled him off the project and sent him out to the desert for two or three days' recuperation.

Larsen had been glad to get away. For the first two days he had lounged aimlessly around the deserted chalets, pleasantly fuddled by the barbiturates Bayliss prescribed, gazing out across the white deck of the desert floor, going to bed by eight and sleeping until noon. Every morning the caretaker had driven in from the town near by to clean up and leave the groceries and menu slips, but Larsen never saw her. He was only too glad to be alone. Deliberately seeing no one, allowing the natural rhythms of his mind to re-establish themselves, he knew he would soon recover.

In fact, however, the first person he had seen had stepped up to him straight out of a nightmare.

Larsen still looked back on the encounter with a shudder.

After lunch on his third day at the chalet he had decided to drive out into the desert and examine an old quartz mine in one of the canyons. This was a two-hour trip and he had made up a thermos of iced martini. The garage was adjacent to the chalet, set back from the kitchen side entrance, and fitted with a roll steel door that lifted vertically and curved up under the roof.

Larsen had locked the chalet behind him, then raised the garage door and driven his car out on to the apron. Going back for the thermos which he had left on the bench at the rear of the garage, he had noticed a full can of petrol in the shadows against one corner. For a moment he paused, adding up his mileage, and decided to take the can with him. He carried it over to the car, then turned round to close the garage door.

The roll had failed to retreat completely when he had first raised it, and reached down to the level of his chin. Putting his weight on the handle, Larsen managed to move it down a few inches, but the inertia was too much for him. The sunlight reflected in the steel panels was dazzling his eyes. Pressing his palms under the door, he jerked it upwards slightly to gain more momentum on the downward swing.

The space was small, no more than six inches, but it was just enough for him to see into the darkened garage.

Hiding in the shadows against the back wall near the bench was the indistinct but nonetheless unmistakable figure of a man. He stood motionless, arms loosely at his sides, watching Larsen. He wore a light cream suit – covered by patches of shadow that gave him a curious fragmentary look – a neat blue sports-shirt and two-tone shoes. He was stockily built, with a thick brush moustache, a plump face, and eyes that stared steadily at Larsen but somehow seemed to be focused beyond him.

Still holding the door with both hands, Larsen gaped at the man. Not

only was there no means by which he could have entered the garage – there were no windows or side doors – but there was something aggressive about his stance.

Larsen was about to call to him when the man moved forward and stepped straight out of the shadows towards him.

Aghast, Larsen backed away. The dark patches across the man's suit were not shadows at all, but the outline of the work bench directly behind him.

The man's body and clothes were transparent.

Galvanized into life, Larsen seized the garage door and hurled it down. He snapped the bolt in and jammed it closed with both hands, knees pressed against it.

Half paralysed by cramp and barely breathing, his suit soaked with sweat, he was still holding the door down when Bayliss drove up thirty minutes later.

Larsen drummed his fingers irritably on the desk, stood up and went into the kitchen. Cut off from the barbiturates they had been intended to counteract, the three amphetamines had begun to make him feel restless and overstimulated. He switched the coffee percolator on and then off, prowled back to the lounge and sat down on the sofa with the copy of Kretschmer.

He read a few pages, increasingly impatient. What light Kretschmer threw on his problem was hard to see; most of the case histories described deep schizos and irreversible paranoids. His own problem was much more superficial, a momentary aberration due to overloading. Why wouldn't Bayliss see this? For some reason he seemed to be unconsciously wishing for a major crisis, probably because he, the psychologist, secretly wanted to become the patient.

Larsen tossed the book aside and looked out through the window at the desert. Suddenly the chalet seemed dark and cramped, a claustrophobic focus of suppressed aggressions. He stood up, strode over to the door and stepped out into the clear open air.

Grouped in a loose semicircle, the chalets seemed to shrink towards the ground as he strolled to the rim of the concrete apron a hundred yards away. The mountains behind loomed up enormously. It was late afternoon, on the edge of dusk, and the sky was a vivid vibrant blue, the deepening colours of the desert floor overlaid by the huge lanes of shadow that reached from the mountains against the sunline. Larsen looked back at the chalets. There was no sign of movement, other than a faint discordant echo of the atonal music Bayliss was playing. The whole scene seemed suddenly unreal.

Reflecting on this, Larsen felt something shift inside his mind. The sensation was undefined, like an expected cue that had failed to materialize, a forgotten intention. He tried to recall it, unable to remember whether he had switched on the coffee percolator.

He walked back to the chalets, noticing that he had left the kitchen door open. As he passed the lounge window on his way to close it he glanced in.

A man was sitting on the sofa, legs crossed, face hidden by the volume of Kretschmer. For a moment Larsen assumed that Bayliss had called in to see him, and walked on, deciding to make coffee for them both. Then he noticed that the stereogram was still playing in Bayliss's chalet.

Picking his steps carefully, he moved back to the lounge window. The man's face was still hidden, but a single glance confirmed that the visitor was not Bayliss. He was wearing the same cream suit Larsen had seen two days earlier, the same two-tone shoes. But this time the man was no hallucination; his hands and clothes were solid and palpable. He shifted about on the sofa, denting one of the cushions, and turned a page of the book, flexing the spine between his hands.

Pulse thickening, Larsen braced himself against the window-ledge. Something about the man, his posture, the way he held his hands, convinced him that he had seen him before their fragmentary encounter in the garage.

Then the man lowered the book and threw it on to the seat beside him. He sat back and looked through the window, his focus only a few inches from Larsen's face.

Mesmerized, Larsen stared back at him. He recognized the man without doubt, the pudgy face, the nervous eyes, the too thick moustache. Now at last he could see him clearly and realized he knew him only too well, better than anyone else on Earth.

The man was himself.

Bayliss clipped the hypodermic into his valise, and placed it on the lid of the stereogram.

'Hallucination is the wrong term altogether,' he told Larsen, who was lying stretched out on Bayliss's sofa, sipping weakly at a glass of hot whisky. 'Stop using it. A psychoretinal image of remarkable strength and duration, but not an hallucination.'

Larsen gestured feebly. He had stumbled into Bayliss's chalet an hour earlier, literally beside himself with fright. Bayliss had calmed him down, then dragged him back across the apron to the lounge window and made him accept that his double was gone. Bayliss was not in the least surprised at the identity of the phantom, and this worried Larsen almost as much as the actual hallucination. What else was Bayliss hiding up his sleeve?

'I'm surprised you didn't realize it sooner yourself,' Bayliss remarked. 'Your description of the man in the garage was so obvious – the same cream suit, the same shoes and shirt, let alone the exact physical similarity, even down to your moustache.'

Recovering a little, Larsen sat up. He smoothed down his cream gabardine suit and brushed the dust off his brown-and-white shoes. 'Thanks for warning me. All you've got to do now is tell me who he is.'

Bayliss sat down in one of the chairs. 'What do you mean, who he is? He's you, of course.'

'I know that, but why, where does he come from? God, I must be going insane.'

Bayliss snapped his fingers. 'No you're not. Pull yourself together. This is a purely functional disorder, like double vision or amnesia; nothing more serious. If it was, I'd have pulled you out of here long ago. Perhaps I should have done that anyway, but I think we can find a safe way out of the maze you're in.'

He took a notebook out of his breast pocket. 'Let's have a look at what we've got. Now, two features stand out. First, the phantom is yourself. There's no doubt about that; he's an exact replica of you. More important, though, he is you as you are now, your exact contemporary in time, unidealized and unmutilated. He isn't the shining hero of the super-ego, or the haggard grey-beard of the death wish. He is simply a photographic double. Displace one eyeball with your finger and you'll see a double of me. Your double is no more unusual, with the exception that the displacement is not in space but in time. You see, the second thing I noticed about your garbled description of this phantom was that, not only was he a photographic double, but he was doing exactly what you yourself had been doing a few minutes previously. The man in the garage was standing by the workbench, just where you stood when you were wondering whether to take the can of petrol. Again, the man reading in the armchair was merely repeating exactly what you had been doing with the same book five minutes earlier. He even stared out of the window as you say you did before going out for a stroll.'

Larsen nodded, sipping his whisky. 'You're suggesting that the hallucination was a mental flashback?'

'Precisely. The stream of retinal images reaching the optic lobe is nothing more than a film strip. Every image is stored away, thousands of reels, a hundred thousand hours of running time. Usually flashbacks are deliberate, when we consciously select a few blurry stills from the film library, a childhood scene, the image of our neighbourhood streets we carry around with us all day near the surface of consciousness. But upset the projector slightly – overstrain could do it – jolt it back a few hundred frames, and you'll superimpose a completely irrelevant strip of already exposed film, in your case a glimpse of yourself sitting on the sofa. It's the apparent irrelevancy that is so frightening.'

Larsen gestured with his glass. 'Wait a minute, though. When I was sitting on the sofa reading Kretschmer I didn't actually see myself, any more than I can see myself now. So where did the superimposed images come from?'

Bayliss put away his notebook. 'Don't take the analogy of the film strip too literally. You may not see yourself sitting on that sofa, but your awareness of being there is just as powerful as any visual corroboration. It's the stream of tactile, positional and psychic images that form the real

data store. Very little extrapolation is needed to transpose the observer's eye a few yards to the other side of a room. Purely visual memories are never completely accurate anyway.'

'How do you explain why the man I saw in the garage was transparent?'

'Quite simply. The process was only just beginning, the intensity of the image was weak. The one you saw this afternoon was much stronger. I cut you off barbiturates deliberately, knowing full well that those stimulants you were taking on the sly would set off something if they were allowed to operate unopposed.'

He went over to Larsen, took his glass and refilled it from the decanter. 'But let's think of the future. The most interesting aspect of all this is the light it throws on one of the oldest archetypes of the human psyche – the ghost – and the whole supernatural army of phantoms, witches, demons and so on. Are they all, in fact, nothing more than psychoretinal flashbacks, transposed images of the observer himself, jolted on to the retinal screen by fear, bereavement, religious obsession? The most notable thing about the majority of ghosts is how prosaically equipped they are, compared with the elaborate literary productions of the great mystics and dreamers. The nebulous white sheet is probably the observer's own nightgown. It's an interesting field for speculation. For example, take the most famous ghost in literature and reflect how much more sense Hamlet makes if you realize that the ghost of his murdered father is really Hamlet himself.'

'All right, all right,' Larsen cut in irritably. 'But how does this help me?'

Bayliss broke off his reflective up-and-down patrol of the floor and fixed an eye on Larsen. 'I'm coming to that. There are two methods of dealing with this disfunction of yours. The classical technique is to pump you full of tranquillizers and confine you to a bed for a year or so. Gradually your mind would knit together. Long job, boring for you and everybody else. The alternative method is, frankly, experimental, but I think it might work. I mentioned the phenomenon of the ghost because it's an interesting fact that although there have been tens of thousands of recorded cases of people being pursued by ghosts, and a few of the ghosts themselves being pursued, there have been no cases of ghost and observer actually meeting of their own volition. Tell me, what would have happened if, when you saw your double this afternoon, you had gone straight into the lounge and spoken to him?'

Larsen shuddered. 'Obviously nothing, if your theory holds. I wouldn't like to test it.'

'That's just what you're going to do. Don't panic. The next time you see a double sitting in a chair reading Kretschmer, go up and speak to him. If he doesn't reply sit down in the chair yourself. That's all you have to do.'

Larsen jumped up, gesticulating. 'For heaven's sake, Bayliss, are you crazy? Do you know what it's like to suddenly see yourself? All you want to do is run.'

'I realize that, but it's the worst thing you can do. Why whenever anyone grapples with a ghost does it always vanish instantly? Because forcibly occupying the same physical co-ordinates as the double jolts the psychic projector on to a single channel again. The two separate streams of retinal images coincide and fuse. You've got to try, Larsen. It may be quite an effort, but you'll cure yourself once and for all.'

Larsen shook his head stubbornly. 'The idea's insane.' To himself he added: I'd rather shoot the thing. Then he remembered the .38 in his suitcase, and the presence of the weapon gave him a stronger sense of security than all Bayliss's drugs and advice. The revolver was a simple symbol of aggression, and even if the phantom was only an intruder in his own mind, it gave that portion which still remained intact greater confidence, enough possibly to dissipate the double's power.

Eyes half closed with fatigue, he listened to Bayliss. Half an hour later he went back to his chalet, found the revolver and hid it under a magazine in the letterbox outside the front door. It was too conspicuous to carry and anyway might fire accidentally and injure him. Outside the front door it would be safely hidden and yet easily accessible, ready to mete out a little old-fashioned punishment to any double dealer trying to get into the game.

Two days later, with unexpected vengeance, the opportunity came.

Bayliss had driven into town to buy a new stylus for the stereogram, leaving Larsen to prepare lunch for them while he was away. Larsen pretended to resent the chore, but secretly he was glad of something to do. He was tired of hanging around the chalets while Bayliss watched him as if he were an experimental animal, eagerly waiting for the next crisis. With luck this might never come, if only to spite Bayliss, who had been having everything too much his own way.

After laying the table in Bayliss's kitchenette and getting plenty of ice ready for the martinis (alcohol was just the thing, Larsen readily decided, a wonderful CNS depressant) he went back to his chalet and put on a clean shirt. On an impulse he decided to change his shoes and suit as well, and fished out the blue office serge and black oxfords he had worn on his way out to the desert. Not only were the associations of the cream suit and sports shoes unpleasant, but a complete change of costume might well forestall the double's reappearance, provide a fresh psychic image of himself powerful enough to suppress any wandering versions. Looking at himself in the mirror, he decided to carry the principle even farther. He switched on his shaver and cut away his moustache. Then he thinned out his hair and plastered it back smoothly across his scalp.

The transformation was effective. When Bayliss climbed out of his car and walked into the lounge he almost failed to recognize Larsen. He flinched back at the sight of the sleek-haired, dark-suited figure who stepped from behind the kitchen door.

'What the hell are you playing at?' he snapped at Larsen. 'This is no

time for practical jokes.' He surveyed Larsen critically. 'You look like a cheap detective.'

Larsen guffawed. The incident put him in high spirits, and after several martinis he began to feel extremely buoyant. He talked away rapidly through the meal. Strangely, though, Bayliss seemed eager to get rid of him; he realized why shortly after he returned to his chalet. His pulse had quickened. He found himself prowling around nervously; his brain felt overactive and accelerated. The martinis had only been partly responsible for his elation. Now that they were wearing off he began to see the real agent – a stimulant Bayliss had given him in the hope of precipitating another crisis.

Larsen stood by the window, staring out angrily at Bayliss's chalet. The psychologist's utter lack of scruple outraged him. His fingers fretted nervously across the blind. Suddenly he felt like kicking the whole place down and speeding off. With its plywood-thin walls and match-box furniture the chalet was nothing more than a cardboard asylum. Everything that had happened there, the breakdowns and his nightmarish phantoms, had probably been schemed up by Bayliss deliberately.

Larsen noticed that the stimulant seemed to be extremely powerful. The take-off was sustained and unbroken. He tried hopelessly to relax, went into the bedroom and kicked his suitcase around, lit two cigarettes without realizing it.

Finally, unable to contain himself any longer, he slammed the front door back and stormed out across the apron, determined to have everything out with Bayliss and demand an immediate sedative.

Bayliss's lounge was empty. Larsen plunged through into the kitchen and bedroom, discovered to his annoyance that Bayliss was having a shower. He hung around in the lounge for a few moments, then decided to wait in his chalet.

Head down, he crossed the bright sunlight at a fast stride, and was only a few steps from the darkened doorway when he noticed that a man in a blue suit was standing there watching him.

Heart leaping, Larsen shrank back, recognizing the double even before he had completely accepted the change of costume, the smooth-shaven face with its altered planes. The man hovered indecisively, flexing his fingers, and appeared to be on the verge of stepping down into the sunlight.

Larsen was about ten feet from him, directly in line with Bayliss's door. He backed away, at the same time swinging to his left to the lee of the garage. There he stopped and pulled himself together. The double was still hesitating in the doorway, longer, he was sure, than he himself had done. Larsen looked at the face, repulsed, not so much by the absolute accuracy of the image, but by a strange, almost luminous pastiness that gave the double's features the waxy sheen of a corpse. It was this unpleasant gloss that held Larsen back – the double was an arm's length from the letterbox holding the .38, and nothing could have induced Larsen to approach it.

He decided to enter the chalet and watch the double from behind. Rather than use the kitchen door, which gave access to the lounge on the double's immediate right, he turned to circle the garage and climb in through the bedroom window on the far side.

He was picking his way through a dump of old mortar and barbed wire behind the garage when he heard a voice call out:

'Larsen, you idiot, what do you think you're doing?'

It was Bayliss, leaning out of his bathroom window. Larsen stumbled, found his balance and waved Bayliss back angrily. Bayliss merely shook his head and leaned farther out, drying his neck with a towel.

Larsen retraced his steps, signalling to Bayliss to keep quiet. He was crossing the space between the garage wall and the near corner of Bayliss's chalet when out of the side of his eye he noticed a dark-suited figure standing with its back to him a few yards from the garage door.

The double had moved! Larsen stopped, Bayliss forgotten, and watched the double warily. He was poised on the balls of his feet, as Larsen had been only a minute or so earlier, elbows up, hands waving defensively. His eyes were hidden, but he appeared to be looking at the front door of Larsen's chalet.

Automatically, Larsen's eyes also moved to the doorway.

The original blue-suited figure still stood there, staring out into the sunlight.

There was not one double now, but two.

For a moment Larsen stared helplessly at the two figures, standing on either side of the apron like half-animated dummies in a waxworks tableau.

The figure with its back to him swung on one heel and began to stalk rapidly towards him. He gazed sightlessly at Larsen, the sunlight exposing his face. With a jolt of horror Larsen recognized for the first time the perfect similarity of the double – the same plump cheeks, the same mole by the right nostril, the white upper lip with the same small razor cut where the moustache had been shaved away. Above all he recognized the man's state of shock, the nervous lips, the tension around the neck and facial muscles, the utter exhaustion just below the surface of the mask.

His voice strangled, Larsen turned and bolted.

He stopped running about two hundred yards out in the desert beyond the edge of the apron. Gasping for breath, he dropped to one knee behind a narrow sandstone outcropping and looked back at the chalets. The second double was making his way around the garage, climbing through the tangle of old wire. The other was crossing the space between the chalets. Oblivious of them both, Bayliss was struggling with the bathroom window, forcing it back so that he could see out into the desert.

Trying to steady himself, Larsen wiped his face on his jacket sleeve. So Bayliss had been right, although he had never anticipated that more than one image could be seen during any single attack. But in fact Larsen had spawned two in close succession, each at a critical phase during the last

five minutes. Wondering whether to wait for the images to fade, Larsen remembered the revolver in the letterbox. However irrational, it seemed his only hope. With it he would be able to test the ultimate validity of the doubles.

The outcropping ran diagonally to the edge of the apron. Crouching forwards, he scurried along it, pausing at intervals to follow the scene. The two doubles were still holding their positions, though Bayliss had closed his window and disappeared.

Larsen reached the edge of the apron, which was built on a shallow table about a foot off the desert floor, and moved along its rim to where an old fifty-gallon drum gave him a vantage point. To reach the revolver he decided to go round the far side of Bayliss's chalet, where he would find his own doorway unguarded except for the double watching by the garage.

He was about to step forward when something made him look over his shoulder.

Running straight towards him along the outcropping, head down, hands almost touching the ground, was an enormous ratlike creature. Every ten or fifteen yards it paused for a moment, and looked out at the chalets, and Larsen caught a glimpse of its face, insane and terrified, another replica of his own.

'Larsen! Larsen!'

Bayliss stood by the chalet, waving out at the desert.

Larsen glanced back at the phantom hurtling towards him, now only thirty feet away, then jumped up and lurched helplessly across to Bayliss.

Bayliss caught him firmly with his hands. 'Larsen, what's the matter with you? Are you having an attack?'

Larsen gestured at the figures around him. 'Stop them, Bayliss, for God's sake,' he gasped. 'I can't get away from them.'

Bayliss shook him roughly. 'You can see *more* than one? Where are they? Show me.'

Larsen pointed at the two figures hovering luminously near the chalet, then waved limply in the direction of the desert. 'By the garage, and over there along the wall. There's another hiding along that ridge.'

Bayliss seized him by the arm. 'Come on, man, you've got to face up to them, it's no use running.' He tried to drag Larsen towards the garage, but Larsen slipped down on to the concrete.

'I can't, Bayliss, believe me. There's a gun in my letterbox. Get it for me. It's the only way.'

Bayliss hesitated, looking down at Larsen. 'All right. Try to hold on.'

Larsen pointed to the far corner of Bayliss's chalet. 'I'll wait over there for you.'

As Bayliss ran off he hobbled towards the corner. Halfway there he tripped across the remains of a ladder lying on the ground and twisted his right ankle between two of the rungs.

Clasping his foot, he sat down just as Bayliss appeared between the

chalets, the revolver in his hand. He looked around for Larsen, who cleared his throat to call him.

Before he could open his mouth he saw the double who had followed him along the ridge leap up from behind the drum and stumble up to Bayliss across the concrete floor. He was dishevelled and exhausted, jacket almost off his shoulders, the tie knot under one ear. The image was still pursuing him, dogging his footsteps like an obsessed shadow.

Larsen tried to call to Bayliss again, but something he saw choked the voice in his throat.

Bayliss was looking at his double.

Larsen stood up, feeling a sudden premonition of terror. He tried to wave to Bayliss, but the latter was watching the double intently as it pointed to the figures near by, nodding to it in apparent agreement.

'Bayliss!'

The shot drowned his cry. Bayliss had fired somewhere between the garages, and the echo of the shot bounded among the chalets. The double was still beside him, pointing in all directions. Bayliss raised the revolver and fired again. The sound slammed across the concrete, making Larsen feel stunned and sick.

Now Bayliss too was seeing simultaneous images, not of himself but of Larsen, on whom his mind had been focusing for the past weeks. A repetition of Larsen stumbling over to him and pointing at the phantoms was being repeated in Bayliss's mind, at the exact moment when he had returned with the revolver and was searching for a target.

Larsen started to crawl away, trying to reach the corner. A third shot roared through the air, the flash reflected in the bathroom window.

He had almost reached the corner when he heard Bayliss shout. Leaning one hand against the wall, he looked back.

Mouth open, Bayliss was staring wildly at him, the revolver clenched like a bomb in his hand. Beside him the blue-suited figure stood quietly, straightening its tie. At last Bayliss had realized he could see two images of Larsen, one beside him, the other twenty feet away against the chalet.

But how was he to know which was the real Larsen?

Staring at Larsen, he seemed unable to decide.

Then the double by his shoulder raised one arm and pointed at Larsen, towards the corner wall to which he himself had pointed a minute earlier.

Larsen tried to shout, then hurled himself at the wall and pulled himself along it. Behind him Bayliss's feet came thudding across the concrete.

He heard only the first of the three shots.

1960

CHRONOPOLIS

His trial had been fixed for the next day. Exactly when, of course, neither Newman nor anyone else knew. Probably it would be during the afternoon, when the principals concerned – judge, jury and prosecutor – managed to converge on the same courtroom at the same time. With luck his defence attorney might also appear at the right moment, though the case was such an open and shut one that Newman hardly expected him to bother – besides, transport to and from the old penal complex was notoriously difficult, involved endless waiting in the grimy depot below the prison walls.

Newman had passed the time usefully. Luckily, his cell faced south and sunlight traversed it for most of the day. He divided its arc into ten equal segments, the effective daylight hours, marking the intervals with a wedge of mortar prised from the window ledge. Each segment he further subdivided into twelve smaller units.

Immediately he had a working timepiece, accurate to within virtually a minute (the final subdivision into fifths he made mentally). The sweep of white notches, curving down one wall, across the floor and metal bedstead, and up the other wall, would have been recognizable to anyone who stood with his back to the window, but no one ever did. Anyway, the guards were too stupid to understand, and the sundial had given Newman a tremendous advantage over them. Most of the time, when he wasn't recalibrating the dial, he would press against the grille, keeping an eye on the orderly room.

'Brocken!' he would shout out at 7.15, as the shadow line hit the first interval. 'Morning inspection! On your feet, man!' The sergeant would come stumbling out of his bunk in a sweat, cursing the other warders as the reveille bell split the air.

Later, Newman sang out the other events on the daily roster: roll-call, cell fatigues, breakfast, exercise and so on round to the evening roll just before dusk. Brocken regularly won the block merit for the best-run cell deck and he relied on Newman to programme the day for him, anticipate the next item on the roster and warn him if anything went on for too long – in some of the other blocks fatigues were usually over in three minutes while breakfast or exercise could go on for hours, none of the warders knowing when to stop, the prisoners insisting that they had only just begun.

Brocken never inquired how Newman organized everything so exactly;

once or twice a week, when it rained or was overcast, Newman would be strangely silent, and the resulting confusion reminded the sergeant forcefully of the merits of co-operation. Newman was kept in cell privileges and all the cigarettes he needed. It was a shame that a date for the trial had finally been named.

Newman, too, was sorry. Most of his research so far had been inconclusive. Primarily his problem was that, given a northward-facing cell for the bulk of his sentence, the task of estimating the time might become impossible. The inclination of the shadows in the exercise yards or across the towers and walls provided too blunt a reading. Calibration would have to be visual; an optical instrument would soon be discovered.

What he needed was an internal timepiece, an unconsciously operating psychic mechanism regulated, say, by his pulse or respiratory rhythms. He had tried to train his time sense, running an elaborate series of tests to estimate its minimum in-built error, and this had been disappointingly large. The chances of conditioning an accurate reflex seemed slim.

However, unless he could tell the exact time at any given moment, he knew he would go mad.

His obsession, which now faced him with a charge of murder, had revealed itself innocently enough.

As a child, like all children, he had noticed the occasional ancient clock tower, bearing the same white circle with its twelve intervals. In the seedier areas of the city the round characteristic dials often hung over cheap jewellery stores, rusting and derelict.

'Just signs,' his mother explained. 'They don't mean anything, like stars or rings.'

Pointless embellishment, he had thought.

Once, in an old furniture shop, they had seen a clock with hands, upside down in a box full of fire-irons and miscellaneous rubbish.

'Eleven and twelve,' he had pointed out. 'What does it mean?'

His mother had hurried him away, reminding herself never to visit that street again. Time Police were still supposed to be around, watching for any outbreak. 'Nothing,' she told him sharply. 'It's all finished.' To herself she added experimentally: Five and twelve. Five *to* twelve. Yes.

Time unfolded at its usual sluggish, half-confused pace. They lived in a ramshackle house in one of the amorphous suburbs, a zone of endless afternoons. Sometimes he went to school, until he was ten spent most of his time with his mother queueing outside the closed food stores. In the evenings he would play with the neighbourhood gang around the abandoned railway station, punting a home-made flat car along the overgrown tracks, or break into one of the unoccupied houses and set up a temporary command post.

He was in no hurry to grow up; the adult world was unsynchronized and ambitionless. After his mother died he spent long days in the attic,

going through her trunks and old clothes, playing with the bric-à-brac of hats and beads, trying to recover something of her personality.

In the bottom compartment of her jewellery case he came across a small flat gold-cased object, equipped with a wrist strap. The dial had no hands but the twelve-numbered face intrigued him and he fastened it to his wrist.

His father choked over his soup when he saw it that evening.

'Conrad, my God! Where in heaven did you get that?'

'In Mamma's bead box. Can't I keep it?'

'No. Conrad, give it to me! Sorry, son.' Thoughtfully: 'Let's see, you're fourteen. Look, Conrad, I'll explain it all in a couple of years.'

With the impetus provided by this new taboo there was no need to wait for his father's revelations. Full knowledge came soon. The older boys knew the whole story, but strangely enough it was disappointingly dull.

'Is that all?' he kept saying. 'I don't get it. Why worry so much about clocks? We have calendars, don't we?'

Suspecting more, he scoured the streets, carefully inspecting every derelict clock for a clue to the real secret. Most of the faces had been mutilated, hands and numerals torn off, the circle of minute intervals stripped away, leaving a shadow of fading rust. Distributed apparently at random all over the city, above stores, banks and public buildings, their real purpose was hard to discover. Sure enough, they measured the progress of time through twelve arbitrary intervals, but this seemed barely adequate grounds for outlawing them. After all, a whole variety of timers were in general use: in kitchens, factories, hospitals, wherever a fixed period of time was needed. His father had one by his bed at night. Sealed into the standard small black box, and driven by miniature batteries, it emitted a high penetrating whistle shortly before breakfast the next morning, woke him if he overslept. A clock was no more than a calibrated timer, in many ways less useful, as it provided you with a steady stream of irrelevant information. What if it was half past three, as the old reckoning put it, if you weren't planning to start or finish anything then?

Making his questions sound as naïve as possible, he conducted a long, careful poll. Under fifty no one appeared to know anything at all about the historical background, and even the older people were beginning to forget. He also noticed that the less educated they were the more they were willing to talk, indicating that manual and lower-class workers had played no part in the revolution and consequently had no guilt-charged memories to repress. Old Mr Crichton, the plumber who lived in the basement apartment; reminisced without any prompting, but nothing he said threw any light on the problem.

'Sure, there were thousands of clocks then, millions of them, everybody had one. Watches we called them, strapped to the wrist, you had to screw them up every day.'

'But what did you *do* with them, Mr Crichton?' Conrad pressed.

'Well, you just – looked at them, and you knew what time it was. One o'clock, or two, or half past seven – that was when I'd go off to work.'

'But you go off to work now when you've had breakfast. And if you're late the timer rings.'

Crichton shook his head. 'I can't explain it to you, lad. You ask your father.'

But Mr Newman was hardly more helpful. The explanation promised for Conrad's sixteenth birthday never materialized. When his questions persisted Mr Newman tired of side-stepping, shut him up with an abrupt: 'Just stop thinking about it, do you understand? You'll get yourself and the rest of us into a lot of trouble.'

Stacey, the young English teacher, had a wry sense of humour, liked to shock the boys by taking up unorthodox positions on marriage or economics. Conrad wrote an essay describing an imaginary society completely preoccupied with elaborate rituals revolving around a minute by minute observance of the passage of time.

Stacey refused to play, however, gave him a non-committal beta plus, after class quietly asked Conrad what had prompted the fantasy. At first Conrad tried to back away, then finally came out with the question that contained the central riddle.

'Why is it against the law to have a clock?'

Stacey tossed a piece of chalk from one hand to the other.

'Is it against the law?'

Conrad nodded. 'There's an old notice in the police station offering a bounty of one hundred pounds for every clock or wristwatch brought in. I saw it yesterday. The sergeant said it was still in force.'

Stacey raised his eyebrows mockingly. 'You'll make a million. Thinking of going into business?'

Conrad ignored this. 'It's against the law to have a gun because you might shoot someone. But how can you hurt anybody with a clock?'

'Isn't it obvious? You can time him, know exactly how long it takes him to do something.'

'Well?'

'Then you can make him do it faster.'

At seventeen, on a sudden impulse, he built his first clock. Already his preoccupation with time was giving him a marked lead over his class-mates. One or two were more intelligent, others more conscientious, but Conrad's ability to organize his leisure and homework periods allowed him to make the most of his talents. When the others were lounging around the railway yard on their way home Conrad had already completed half his prep, allocating his time according to its various demands.

As soon as he finished he would go up to the attic playroom, now his workshop. Here, in the old wardrobes and trunks, he made his first experimental constructions: calibrated candles, crude sundials, sand-glasses, an

elaborate clockwork contraption developing about half a horse power that drove its hands progressively faster and faster in an unintentional parody of Conrad's obsession.

His first serious clock was water-powered, a slowly leaking tank holding a wooden float that drove the hands as it sank downwards. Simple but accurate, it satisfied Conrad for several months while he carried out his ever-widening search for a real clock mechanism. He soon discovered that although there were innumerable table clocks, gold pocket watches and timepieces of every variety rusting in junk shops and in the back drawers of most homes, none of them contained their mechanisms. These, together with the hands, and sometimes the digits, had always been removed. His own attempts to build an escapement that would regulate the motion of the ordinary clockwork motor met with no success; everything he had heard about clock movements confirmed that they were precision instruments of exact design and construction. To satisfy his secret ambition – a portable timepiece, if possible an actual wristwatch – he would have to find one, somewhere, in working order.

Finally, from an unexpected source, a watch came to him. One afternoon in a cinema an elderly man sitting next to Conrad had a sudden heart attack. Conrad and two members of the audience carried him out to the manager's office. Holding one of his arms, Conrad noticed in the dim aisle light a glint of metal inside the sleeve. Quickly he felt the wrist with his fingers, identified the unmistakable lens-shaped disc of a wristwatch.

As he carried it home its tick seemed as loud as a death-knell. He clamped his hand around it, expecting everyone in the street to point accusingly at him, the Time Police to swoop down and seize him.

In the attic he took it out and examined it breathlessly, smothering it in a cushion whenever he heard his father shift about in the bedroom below. Later he realized that its noise was almost inaudible. The watch was of the same pattern as his mother's, though with a yellow and not a red face. The gold case was scratched and peeling, but the movement seemed to be in perfect condition. He prised off the rear plate, watched the frenzied flickering world of miniature cogs and wheels for hours, spellbound. Frightened of breaking the main spring, he kept the watch only half wound, packed away carefully in cotton wool.

In taking the watch from its owner he had not, in fact, been motivated by theft; his first impulse had been to hide the watch before the doctor discovered it feeling for the man's pulse. But once the watch was in his possession he abandoned any thought of tracing the owner and returning it.

That others were still wearing watches hardly surprised him. The water clock had demonstrated that a calibrated timepiece added another dimension to life, organized its energies, gave the countless activities of everyday existence a yardstick of significance. Conrad spent hours in the attic gazing at the small yellow dial, watching its minute hand revolve

slowly, its hour hand press on imperceptibly, a compass charting his passage through the future. Without it he felt rudderless, adrift in a grey purposeless limbo of timeless events. His father began to seem idle and stupid, sitting around vacantly with no idea when anything was going to happen.

Soon he was wearing the watch all day. He stitched together a slim cotton sleeve, fitted with a narrow flap below which he could see the face. He timed everything – the length of classes, football games, meal breaks, the hours of daylight and darkness, sleep and waking. He amused himself endlessly by baffling his friends with demonstrations of this private sixth sense, anticipating the frequency of their heartbeats, the hourly newscasts on the radio, boiling a series of identically consistent eggs without the aid of a timer.

Then he gave himself away.

Stacey, shrewder than any of the others, discovered that he was wearing a watch. Conrad had noticed that Stacey's English classes lasted exactly forty-five minutes, let himself slide into the habit of tidying his desk a minute before Stacey's timer pipped up. Once or twice he noticed Stacey looking at him curiously, but he could not resist the temptation to impress Stacey by always being the first one to make for the door.

One day he had stacked his books and clipped away his pen when Stacey pointedly asked him to read out a précis he had done. Conrad knew the timer would pip out in less than ten seconds, and decided to sit tight and wait for the usual stampede to save him the trouble.

Stacey stepped down from the dais, waiting patiently. One or two boys turned around and frowned at Conrad, who was counting away the closing seconds.

Then, amazed, he realized that the timer had failed to sound! Panicking, he first thought his watch had broken, just restrained himself in time from looking at it.

'In a hurry, Newman?' Stacey asked dryly. He sauntered down the aisle to Conrad, smiling sardonically. Baffled, and face reddening with embarrassment, Conrad fumbled open his exercise book, read out the précis. A few minutes later, without waiting for the timer, Stacey dismissed the class.

'Newman,' he called out. 'Here a moment.'

He rummaged behind the rostrum as Conrad approached. 'What happened then?' he asked. 'Forget to wind up your watch this morning?'

Conrad said nothing. Stacey took out the timer, switched off the silencer and listened to the pip that buzzed out.

'Where did you get it from? Your parents? Don't worry, the Time Police were disbanded years ago.'

Conrad examined Stacey's face carefully. 'It was my mother's,' he lied. 'I found it among her things.' Stacey held out his hand and Conrad nervously unstrapped the watch and handed it to him.

Stacey slipped it half out of its sleeve, glanced briefly at the yellow face. 'Your mother, you say? Hmh.'

'Are you going to report me?' Conrad asked.

'What, and waste some over-worked psychiatrist's time even further?'

'Isn't it breaking the law to wear a watch?'

'Well, you're not exactly the greatest living menace to public security.' Stacey started for the door, gesturing Conrad with him. He handed the watch back. 'Cancel whatever you're doing on Saturday afternoon. You and I are taking a trip.'

'Where?' Conrad asked.

'Back into the past,' Stacey said lightly. 'To Chronopolis, the Time City.'

Stacey had hired a car, a huge battered mastodon of chromium and fins. He waved jauntily to Conrad as he picked him up outside the public library.

'Climb into the turret,' he called out. He pointed to the bulging briefcase Conrad slung on to the seat between them. 'Have you had a look at those yet?'

Conrad nodded. As they moved off around the deserted square he opened the briefcase and pulled out a thick bundle of road maps. 'I've just worked out that the city covers over 500 square miles. I'd never realized it was so big. Where is everybody?'

Stacey laughed. They crossed the main street, cut down into a long tree-lined avenue of semi-detached houses. Half of them were empty, windows wrecked and roofs sagging. Even the inhabited houses had a makeshift appearance, crude water towers on home-made scaffolding lashed to their chimneys, piles of logs dumped in over-grown front gardens.

'Thirty million people once lived in this city,' Stacey remarked. 'Now the population is little more than two, and still declining. Those of us left hang on in what were once the distal suburbs, so that the city today is effectively an enormous ring, five miles in width, encircling a vast dead centre forty or fifty miles in diameter.'

They wove in and out of various back roads, past a small factory still running although work was supposed to end at noon, finally picked up a long, straight boulevard that carried them steadily westwards. Conrad traced their progress across successive maps. They were nearing the edge of the annulus Stacey had described. On the map it was overprinted in green so that the central interior appeared a flat, uncharted grey, a massive *terra incognita.*

They passed the last of the small shopping thoroughfares he remembered, a frontier post of mean terraced houses, dismal streets spanned by massive steel viaducts. Stacey pointed up at one as they drove below it. 'Part of the elaborate railway system that once existed, an enormous network of stations and junctions that carried fifteen million people into a dozen great terminals every day.'

For half an hour they drove on, Conrad hunched against the window, Stacey watching him in the driving mirror. Gradually, the landscape began to change. The houses were taller, with coloured roofs, the sidewalks were railed off and fitted with pedestrian lights and turnstiles. They had entered the inner suburbs, completely deserted streets with multi-level supermarkets, towering cinemas and department stores.

Chin in one hand, Conrad stared out silently. Lacking any means of transport he had never ventured into the uninhabited interior of the city, like the other children always headed in the opposite direction for the open country. Here the streets had died twenty or thirty years earlier; plate-glass shopfronts had slipped and smashed into the roadway, old neon signs, window frames and overhead wires hung down from every cornice, trailing a ragged webwork of disintegrating metal across the pavements. Stacey drove slowly, avoiding the occasional bus or truck abandoned in the middle of the road, its tyres peeling off their rims.

Conrad craned up at the empty windows, into the narrow alleys and side-streets, but nowhere felt any sensation of fear or anticipation. These streets were merely derelict, as unhaunted as a half-empty dustbin.

One suburban centre gave way to another, to long intervening stretches of congested ribbon developments. Mile by mile, the architecture altered its character; buildings were larger, ten- or fifteen-storey blocks, clad in facing materials of green and blue tiles, glass or copper sheathing. They were moving forward in time rather than, as Conrad had expected, back into the past of a fossil city.

Stacey worked the car through a nexus of side-streets towards a six-lane expressway that rose on tall concrete buttresses above the roof-tops. They found a side road that circled up to it, levelled out and then picked up speed sharply, spinning along one of the clear centre lanes.

Conrad craned forward. In the distance, two or three miles away, the tall rectilinear outlines of enormous apartment blocks reared up thirty or forty storeys high, hundreds of them lined shoulder to shoulder in apparently endless ranks, like giant dominoes.

'We're entering the central dormitories here,' Stacey told him. On either side buildings overtopped the motorway, the congestion mounting so that some of them had been built right up against the concrete palisades.

In a few minutes they passed between the first of the apartment batteries, the thousands of identical living units with their slanting balconies shearing up into the sky, the glass in-falls of the aluminium curtain walling speckling in the sunlight. The smaller houses and shops of the outer suburbs had vanished. There was no room on the ground level. In the narrow intervals between the blocks there were small concrete gardens, shopping complexes, ramps banking down into huge underground car parks.

And on all sides there were the clocks. Conrad noticed them immediately, at every street corner, over every archway, three-quarters of the way up the sides of buildings, covering every conceivable angle of approach.

Most of them were too high off the ground to be reached by anything less than a fireman's ladder and still retained their hands. All registered the same time: 12.01.

Conrad looked at his wristwatch, noted that it was just 2.45 p.m.

'They were driven by a master clock,' Stacey told him. 'When that stopped they all seized at the same moment. One minute after midnight, thirty-seven years ago.'

The afternoon had darkened, as the high cliffs cut off the sunlight, the sky a succession of narrow vertical intervals opening and closing around them. Down on the canyon floor it was dismal and oppressive, a wilderness of concrete and frosted glass. The expressway divided and pressed on westwards. After a few more miles the apartment blocks gave way to the first office buildings in the central zone. These were even taller, sixty or seventy storeys high, linked by spiralling ramps and causeways. The expressway was fifty feet off the ground yet the first floors of the office blocks were level with it, mounted on massive stilts that straddled the glass-enclosed entrance bays of lifts and escalators. The streets were wide but featureless. The sidewalks of parallel roadways merged below the buildings, forming a continuous concrete apron. Here and there were the remains of cigarette kiosks, rusting stairways up to restaurants and arcades built on platforms thirty feet in the air.

Conrad, however, was looking only at the clocks. Never had he visualized so many, in places so dense that they obscured each other. Their faces were multi-coloured: red, blue, yellow, green. Most of them carried four or five hands. Although the master hands had stopped at a minute past twelve, the subsidiary hands had halted at varying positions, apparently dictated by their colour.

'What were the extra hands for?' he asked Stacey. 'And the different colours?'

'Time zones. Depending on your professional category and the consumer-shifts allowed. Hold on, though, we're almost there.'

They left the expressway and swung off down a ramp that fed them into the north-east corner of a wide open plaza, eight hundred yards long and half as wide, down the centre of which had once been laid a continuous strip of lawn, now rank and overgrown. The plaza was empty, a sudden block of free space bounded by tall glass-faced cliffs that seemed to carry the sky.

Stacey parked, and he and Conrad climbed out and stretched themselves. Together they strolled across the wide pavement towards the strip of waist-high vegetation. Looking down the vistas receding from the plaza Conrad grasped fully for the first time the vast perspectives of the city, the massive geometric jungle of buildings.

Stacey put one foot up on the balustrade running around the lawn bed, pointed to the far end of the plaza, where Conrad saw a low-lying huddle of buildings of unusual architectural style, nineteenth-century perpendicular, stained by the atmosphere and badly holed by a number

of explosions. Again, however, his attention was held by the clock face built into a tall concrete tower just behind the older buildings. This was the largest clock dial he had ever seen, at least a hundred feet across, huge black hands halted at a minute past twelve. The dial was white, the first they had seen, but on wide semicircular shoulders built out off the tower below the main face were a dozen smaller faces, no more than twenty feet in diameter, running the full spectrum of colours. Each had five hands, the inferior three halted at random.

'Fifty years ago,' Stacey explained, gesturing at the ruins below the tower, 'that collection of ancient buildings was one of the world's greatest legislative assemblies.' He gazed at it quietly for a few moments, then turned to Conrad. 'Enjoy the ride?'

Conrad nodded fervently. 'It's impressive, all right. The people who lived here must have been giants. What's really remarkable is that it looks as if they left only yesterday. Why don't we go back?'

'Well, apart from the fact that there aren't enough of us now, even if there were we couldn't control it. In its hey-day this city was a fantastically complex social organism. The communications problems are difficult to imagine merely by looking at these blank façades. It's the tragedy of this city that there appeared to be only one way to solve them.'

'Did they solve them?'

'Oh, yes, certainly. But they left themselves out of the equation. Think of the problems, though. Transporting fifteen million office workers to and from the centre every day, routeing in an endless stream of cars, buses, trains, helicopters, linking every office, almost every desk, with a videophone, every apartment with television, radio, power, water, feeding and entertaining this enormous number of people, guarding them with ancillary services, police, fire squads, medical units – it all hinged on one factor.'

Stacey threw a fist out at the great tower clock. 'Time! Only by synchronizing every activity, every footstep forward or backward, every meal, bus-halt and telephone call, could the organism support itself. Like the cells in your body, which proliferate into mortal cancers if allowed to grow in freedom, every individual here had to subserve the overriding needs of the city or fatal bottlenecks threw it into total chaos. You and I can turn on the tap any hour of the day or night, because we have our own private water cisterns, but what would happen here if everybody washed the breakfast dishes within the same ten minutes?'

They began to walk slowly down the plaza towards the clock tower. 'Fifty years ago, when the population was only ten million, they could just provide for a potential peak capacity, but even then a strike in one essential service paralysed most of the others; it took workers two or three hours to reach their offices, as long again to queue for lunch and get home. As the population climbed the first serious attempts were made to stagger hours; workers in certain areas started the day an hour earlier or later than those in others. Their railway passes and car number plates were coloured

accordingly, and if they tried to travel outside the permitted periods they were turned back. Soon the practice spread; you could only switch on your washing machine at a given hour, post a letter or take a bath at a specific period.'

'Sounds feasible,' Conrad commented, his interest mounting. 'But how did they enforce all this?'

'By a system of coloured passes, coloured money, an elaborate set of schedules published every day like the TV or radio programmes. And, of course, by all the thousands of clocks you can see around you here. The subsidiary hands marked out the number of minutes remaining in any activity period for people in the clock's colour category.'

Stacey stopped, pointed to a blue-faced clock mounted on one of the buildings overlooking the plaza. 'Let's say, for example, that a lower-grade executive leaving his office at the allotted time, 12 o'clock, wants to have lunch, change a library book, buy some aspirin, and telephone his wife. Like all executives, his identity zone is blue. He takes out his schedule for the week, or looks down the blue-time columns in the newspaper, and notes that his lunch period for that day is 12.15 to 12.30. He has fifteen minutes to kill. Right, he then checks the library. Time code for today is given as 3, that's the third hand on the clock. He looks at the nearest blue clock, the third hand says 37 minutes past – he has 23 minutes, ample time, to reach the library. He starts down the street, but finds at the first intersection that the pedestrian lights are only shining red and green and he can't get across. The area's been temporarily zoned off for lower-grade women office workers – red, and manuals – greens.'

'What would happen if he ignored the lights?' Conrad asked.

'Nothing immediately, but all blue clocks in the zoned area would have returned to zero, and no shops or the library would serve him, unless he happened to have red or green currency and a forged set of library tickets. Anyway, the penalties were too high to make the risk worthwhile, and the whole system was evolved for his convenience, no one else's. So, unable to reach the library, he decides on the chemist. The time code for the chemist is 5, the fifth, smallest hand. It reads 54 minutes past: he has six minutes to find a chemist and make his purchase. This done, he still has five minutes before lunch, decides to phone his wife. Checking the phone code he sees that no period has been provided for private calls that day – or the next. He'll just have to wait until he sees her that evening.'

'What if he did phone?'

'He wouldn't be able to get his money in the coin box, and even then, his wife, assuming she is a secretary, would be in a red time zone and no longer in her office for that day – hence the prohibition on phone calls. It all meshed perfectly. Your time programme told you when you could switch on your TV set and when to switch off. All electric appliances were fused, and if you strayed outside the programmed periods you'd have a hefty fine and repair bill to meet. The viewer's economic status obviously determined the choice of programme, and vice versa, so there was no question of

coercion. Each day's programme listed your permitted activities: you could go to the hairdresser's, cinema, bank, cocktail bar, at stated times, and if you went then you were sure of being served quickly and efficiently.'

They had almost reached the far end of the plaza. Facing them on its tower was the enormous clock face, dominating its constellation of twelve motionless attendants.

'There were a dozen socio-economic categories: blue for executives, gold for professional classes, yellow for military and government officials – incidentally, it's odd your parents ever got hold of that wristwatch, none of your family ever worked for the government – green for manual workers and so on. But, naturally, subtle subdivisions were possible. The lower-grade executive I mentioned left his office at 12, but a senior executive, with exactly the same time codes, would leave at 11.45, have an extra fifteen minutes, would find the streets clear before the lunch-hour rush of clerical workers.'

Stacey pointed up at the tower. 'This was the Big Clock, the master from which all others were regulated. Central Time Control, a sort of Ministry of Time, gradually took over the old parliamentary buildings as their legislative functions diminished. The programmers were, effectively, the city's absolute rulers.'

As Stacey continued Conrad gazed up at the battery of timepieces, poised helplessly at 12.01. Somehow time itself seemed to have been suspended, around him the great office buildings hung in a neutral interval between yesterday and tomorrow. If one could only start the master clock the entire city would probably slide into gear and come to life, in an instant be repeopled with its dynamic jostling millions.

They began to walk back towards the car. Conrad looked over his shoulder at the clock face, its gigantic arms upright on the silent hour.

'Why did it stop?' he asked.

Stacey looked at him curiously. 'Haven't I made it fairly plain?'

'What do you mean?' Conrad pulled his eyes off the scores of clocks lining the plaza, frowned at Stacey.

'Can you imagine what life was like for all but a few of the thirty million people here?'

Conrad shrugged. Blue and yellow clocks, he noticed, outnumbered all others; obviously the major governmental agencies had operated from the plaza area. 'Highly organized but better than the sort of life we lead,' he replied finally, more interested in the sights around him. 'I'd rather have the telephone for one hour a day than not at all. Scarcities are always rationed, aren't they?'

'But this was a way of life in which everything was scarce. Don't you think there's a point beyond which human dignity is surrendered?'

Conrad snorted. 'There seems to be plenty of dignity here. Look at these buildings, they'll stand for a thousand years. Try comparing them with my father. Anyway, think of the beauty of the system, engineered as precisely as a watch.'

'That's all it was,' Stacey commanded dourly. 'The old metaphor of the cog in the wheel was never more true than here. The full sum of your existence was printed for you in the newspaper columns, mailed to you once a month from the Ministry of Time.'

Conrad was looking off in some other direction and Stacey pressed on in a slightly louder voice. 'Eventually, of course, revolt came. It's interesting that in any industrial society there is usually one social revolution each century, and that successive revolutions receive their impetus from progressively higher social levels. In the eighteenth century it was the urban proletariat, in the nineteenth the artisan classes, in this revolt the white collar office worker, living in his tiny so-called modern flat, supporting through credit pyramids an economic system that denied him all freedom of will or personality, chained him to a thousand clocks . . .' He broke off. 'What's the matter?'

Conrad was staring down one of the side streets. He hesitated, then asked in a casual voice: 'How were these clocks driven? Electrically?'

'Most of them. A few mechanically. Why?'

'I just wondered . . . how they kept them all going.' He dawdled at Stacey's heels, checking the time from his wristwatch and glancing to his left. There were twenty or thirty clocks hanging from the buildings along the side street, indistinguishable from those he had seen all afternoon.

Except for the fact that one of them was working!

It was mounted in the centre of a black glass portico over an entrance-way fifty yards down the right-hand side, about eighteen inches in diameter, with a faded blue face. Unlike the others its hands registered 3.15, the correct time. Conrad had nearly mentioned this apparent coincidence to Stacey when he had suddenly seen the minute hand move on an interval. Without doubt someone had restarted the clock; even if it had been running off an inexhaustible battery, after thirty-seven years it could never have displayed such accuracy.

He hung behind Stacey, who was saying: 'Every revolution has its symbol of oppression . . .'

The clock was almost out of view. Conrad was about to bend down and tie his shoelace when he saw the minute hand jerk downwards, tilt slightly from the horizontal.

He followed Stacey towards the car, no longer bothering to listen to him. Ten yards from it he turned and broke away, ran swiftly across the roadway towards the nearest building.

'Newman!' he heard Stacey shout. 'Come back!' He reached the pavement, ran between the great concrete pillars carrying the building. He paused for a moment behind an elevator shaft, saw Stacey climbing hurriedly into the car. The engine coughed and roared out, and Conrad sprinted on below the building into a rear alley that led back to the side-street. Behind him he heard the car accelerating, a door slam as it picked up speed.

When he entered the side-street the car came swinging off the plaza

thirty yards behind him. Stacey swerved off the roadway, bumped up on to the pavement and gunned the car towards Conrad, throwing on the brakes in savage lurches, blasting the horn in an attempt to frighten him. Conrad side-stepped out of its way, almost falling over the bonnet, hurled himself up a narrow stairway leading to the first floor and raced up the steps to a short landing that ended in tall glass doors. Through them he could see a wide balcony that ringed the building. A fire-escape crisscrossed upwards to the roof, giving way on the fifth floor to a cafeteria that spanned the street to the office building opposite.

Below he heard Stacey's feet running across the pavement. The glass doors were locked. He pulled a fire-extinguisher from its bracket, tossed the heavy cylinder against the centre of the plate. The glass slipped and crashed to the tiled floor in a sudden cascade, splashing down the steps. Conrad stepped through on to the balcony, began to climb the stairway. He had reached the third floor when he saw Stacey below, craning upwards. Hand over hand, Conrad pulled himself up the next two flights, swung over a bolted metal turnstile into the open court of the cafeteria. Tables and chairs lay about on their sides, mixed up with the splintered remains of desks thrown down from the upper floors.

The doors into the covered restaurant were open, a large pool of water lying across the floor. Conrad splashed through it, went over to a window and peered down past an old plastic plant into the street. Stacey seemed to have given up. Conrad crossed the rear of the restaurant, straddled the counter and climbed through a window on to the open terrace running across the street. Beyond the rail he could see into the plaza, the double line of tyre marks curving into the street below.

He had almost crossed to the opposite balcony when a shot roared out into the air. There was a sharp tinkle of falling glass and the sound of the explosion boomed away among the empty canyons.

For a few seconds he panicked. He flinched back from the exposed rail, his ear drums numbed, looking up at the great rectangular masses towering above him on either side, the endless tiers of windows like the faceted eyes of gigantic insects. So Stacey had been armed, almost certainly was a member of the Time Police!

On his hands and knees Conrad scurried along the terrace, slid through the turnstiles and headed for a half-open window on the balcony.

Climbing through, he quickly lost himself in the building.

He finally took up a position in a corner office on the sixth floor, the cafeteria just below him to the right, the stairway up which he had escaped directly opposite.

All afternoon Stacey drove up and down the adjacent streets, sometimes free-wheeling silently with the engine off, at others blazing through at speed. Twice he fired into the air, stopping the car afterwards to call out, his words lost among the echoes rolling from one street to the next. Often he drove along the pavements, swerved about below the buildings as if he expected to flush Conrad from behind one of the banks of escalators.

Finally he appeared to drive off for good, and Conrad turned his attention to the clock in the portico. It had moved on to 6.45, almost exactly the time given by his own watch. Conrad reset this to what he assumed was the correct time, then sat back and waited for whoever had wound it to appear. Around him the thirty or forty other clocks he could see remained stationary at 12.01.

For five minutes he left his vigil, scooped some water off the pool in the cafeteria, suppressed his hunger and shortly after midnight fell asleep in a corner behind the desk.

He woke the next morning to bright sunlight flooding into the office. Standing up, he dusted his clothes, turned around to find a small grey-haired man in a patched tweed suit surveying him with sharp eyes. Slung in the crook of his arm was a large black-barrelled weapon, its hammers menacingly cocked.

The man put down a steel ruler he had evidently tapped against a cabinet, waited for Conrad to collect himself.

'What are you doing here?' he asked in a testy voice. Conrad noticed his pockets were bulging with angular objects that weighed down the sides of his jacket.

'I . . . er . . .' Conrad searched for something to say. Something about the old man convinced him that this was the clock-winder. Suddenly he decided he had nothing to lose by being frank, and blurted out: 'I saw the clock working. Down there on the left. I want to help wind them all up again.'

The old man watched him shrewdly. He had an alert bird-like face, twin folds under his chin like a cockerel's.

'How do you propose to do that?' he asked.

Stuck by this one, Conrad said lamely: 'I'd find a key somewhere.'

The old man frowned. 'One key? That wouldn't do much good.' He seemed to be relaxing slowly, shook his pockets with a dull chink.

For a few moments neither of them said anything. Then Conrad had an inspiration, bared his wrist. 'I have a watch,' he said. 'It's 7.45.'

'Let me see.' The old man stepped forward, briskly took Conrad's wrist, examined the yellow dial. 'Movado Supermatic,' he said to himself. 'CTC issue.' He stepped back, lowering the shotgun, seemed to be summing Conrad up. 'Good,' he remarked at last. 'Let's see. You probably need some breakfast.'

They made their way out of the building, began to walk quickly down the street.

'People sometimes come here,' the old man said. 'Sightseers and police. I watched your escape yesterday, you were lucky not to be killed.' They swerved left and right across the empty streets, the old man darting between the stairways and buttresses. As he walked he held his hands stiffly to his sides, preventing his pockets from swinging. Glancing into

them, Conrad saw that they were full of keys, large and rusty, of every design and combination.

'I presume that was your father's watch,' the old man remarked.

'Grandfather's,' Conrad corrected. He remembered Stacey's lecture, and added: 'He was killed in the plaza.'

The old man frowned sympathetically, for a moment held Conrad's arm.

They stopped below a building, indistinguishable from the others nearby, at one time a bank. The old man looked carefully around him, eyeing the high cliff walls on all sides, then led the way up a stationary escalator.

His quarters were on the second floor, beyond a maze of steel grilles and strongdoors, a stove and a hammock slung in the centre of a large workshop. Lying about on thirty or forty desks in what had once been a typing pool, was an enormous collection of clocks, all being simultaneously repaired. Tall cabinets surrounded them, loaded with thousands of spare parts in neatly labelled correspondence trays – escapements, ratchets, cogwheels, barely recognizable through the rust.

The old man led Conrad over to a wall chart, pointed to the total listed against a column of dates. 'Look at this. There are now 278 running continuously. Believe me, I'm glad you've come. It takes me half my time to keep them wound.'

He made breakfast for Conrad, told him something about himself. His name was Marshall. Once he had worked in Central Time Control as a programmer, had survived the revolt and the Time Police, ten years later returned to the city. At the beginning of each month he cycled out to one of the perimeter towns to cash his pension and collect supplies. The rest of the time he spent winding the steadily increasing number of functioning clocks and searching for others he could dismantle and repair.

'All these years in the rain hasn't done them any good,' he explained, 'and there's nothing I can do with the electrical ones.'

Conrad wandered off among the desks, gingerly feeling the dismembered timepieces that lay around like the nerve cells of some vast unimaginable robot. He felt exhilarated and yet at the same time curiously calm, like a man who has staked his whole life on the turn of a wheel and is waiting for it to spin.

'How can you make sure that they all tell the same time?' he asked Marshall, wondering why the question seemed so important.

Marshall gestured irritably. 'I can't, but what does it matter? There is no such thing as a perfectly accurate clock. The nearest you can get is one that has stopped. Although you never know when, it *is* absolutely accurate twice a day.'

Conrad went over to the window, pointed to the great clock visible in an interval between the rooftops. 'If only we could start that, and run all the others off it.'

'Impossible. The entire mechanism was dynamited. Only the chimer is

intact. Anyway, the wiring of the electrically driven clocks perished years ago. It would take an army of engineers to recondition them.'

Conrad nodded, looked at the scoreboard again. He noticed that Marshall appeared to have lost his way through the years – the completion dates he listed were seven and a half years out. Idly, Conrad reflected on the significance of this irony, but decided not to mention it to Marshall.

For three months Conrad lived with the old man, following him on foot as he cycled about on his rounds, carrying the ladder and the satchel full of keys with which Marshall wound up the clocks, helping him to dismantle recoverable ones and carry them back to the workshop. All day, and often through half the night, they worked together, repairing the movements, restarting the clocks and returning them to their original positions.

All the while, however, Conrad's mind was fixed upon the great clock in its tower dominating the plaza. Once a day he managed to sneak off and make his way into the ruined Time buildings. As Marshall had said, neither the clock nor its twelve satellites would ever run again. The movement house looked like the engine-room of a sunken ship, a rusting tangle of rotors and drive wheels exploded into contorted shapes. Every week he would climb the long stairway up to the topmost platform two hundred feet above, look out through the bell tower at the flat roofs of the office blocks stretching away to the horizon. The hammers rested against their trips in long ranks just below him. Once he kicked one of the treble trips playfully, sent a dull chime out across the plaza.

The sound drove strange echoes into his mind.

Slowly he began to repair the chimer mechanism, rewiring the hammers and the pulley systems, trailing fresh wire up the great height of the tower, dismantling the winches in the movement room below and renovating their clutches.

He and Marshall never discussed their self-appointed tasks. Like animals obeying an instinct they worked tirelessly, barely aware of their own motives. When Conrad told him one day that he intended to leave and continue the work in another sector of the city, Marshall agreed immediately, gave Conrad as many tools as he could spare and bade him goodbye.

Six months later, almost to the day, the sounds of the great clock chimed out across the rooftops of the city, marking the hours, the half-hours and the quarter-hours, steadily tolling the progress of the day. Thirty miles away, in the towns forming the perimeter of the city, people stopped in the streets and in doorways, listening to the dim haunted echoes reflected through the long aisles of apartment blocks on the far horizon, involuntarily counting the slow final sequences that told the hour. Older people whispered to each other: 'Four o'clock, or was it five? They have started the clock again. It seems strange after these years.'

And all through the day they would pause as the quarter and half hours

reached across the miles to them, a voice from their childhoods reminding them of the ordered world of the past. They began to reset their timers by the chimes, at night before they slept they would listen to the long count of midnight, wake to hear them again in the thin clear air of the morning.

Some went down to the police station and asked if they could have their watches and clocks back again.

After sentence, twenty years for the murder of Stacey, five for fourteen offences under the Time Laws, to run concurrently, Newman was led away to the holding cells in the basement of the court. He had expected the sentence and made no comment when invited by the judge. After waiting trial for a year the afternoon in the courtroom was nothing more than a momentary intermission.

He made no attempt to defend himself against the charge of killing Stacey, partly to shield Marshall, who would be able to continue their work unmolested, and partly because he felt indirectly responsible for the policeman's death. Stacey's body, skull fractured by a twenty- or thirty-storey fall, had been discovered in the back seat of his car in a basement garage not far from the plaza. Presumably Marshall had discovered him prowling around and dealt with him single-handed. Newman recalled that one day Marshall had disappeared altogether and had been curiously irritable for the rest of the week.

The last time he had seen the old man had been during the three days before the police arrived. Each morning as the chimes boomed out across the plaza Newman had seen his tiny figure striding briskly down the plaza towards him, waving up energetically at the tower, bareheaded and unafraid.

Now Newman was faced with the problem of how to devise a clock that would chart his way through the coming twenty years. His fears increased when he was taken the next day to the cell block which housed the long-term prisoners – passing his cell on the way to meet the superintendent he noticed that his window looked out on to a small shaft. He pumped his brains desperately as he stood to attention during the superintendent's homilies, wondering how he could retain his sanity. Short of counting the seconds, each one of the 86,400 in every day, he saw no possible means of assessing the time.

Locked into his cell, he sat limply on the narrow bed, too tired to unpack his small bundle of possessions. A moment's inspection confirmed the uselessness of the shaft. A powerful light mounted halfway up masked the sunlight that slipped through a steel grille fifty feet above.

He stretched himself out on the bed and examined the ceiling. A lamp was recessed into its centre, but a second, surprisingly, appeared to have been fitted to the cell. This was on the wall, a few feet above his head. He could see the curving bowl of the protective case, some ten inches in diameter.

He was wondering whether this could be a reading light when he realized that there was no switch.

Swinging round, he sat up and examined it, then leapt to his feet in astonishment.

It was a clock! He pressed his hands against the bowl, reading the circle of numerals, noting the inclination of the hands. 4.53, near enough the present time. Not simply a clock, but one in running order! Was this some sort of macabre joke, or a misguided attempt at rehabilitation?

His pounding on the door brought a warder.

'What's all the noise about? The clock? What's the matter with it?' He unlocked the door and barged in, pushing Newman back.

'Nothing. But why is it here? They're against the law.'

'Oh, is that what's worrying you.' The warder shrugged. 'Well, you see, the rules are a little different in here. You lads have got a lot of time ahead of you, it'd be cruel not to let you know where you stood. You know how to work it, do you? Good.' He slammed the door, bolted it fast, smiled at Newman through the cage. 'It's a long day here, son, as you'll be finding out, that'll help you get through it.'

Gleefully, Newman lay on the bed, his head on a rolled blanket at its foot, staring up at the clock. It appeared to be in perfect order, electrically driven, moving in rigid half-minute jerks. For an hour after the warder left he watched it without a break, then began to tidy up his cell, glancing over his shoulder every few minutes to reassure himself that it was still there, still running efficiently. The irony of the situation, the total inversion of justice, delighted him, even though it would cost him twenty years of his life.

He was still chuckling over the absurdity of it all two weeks later when for the first time he noticed the clock's insanely irritating tick . . .

1960

THE VOICES OF TIME

ONE

Later Powers often thought of Whitby, and the strange grooves the biologist had cut, apparently at random, all over the floor of the empty swimming pool. An inch deep and twenty feet long, interlocking to form an elaborate ideogram like a Chinese character, they had taken him all summer to complete, and he had obviously thought about little else, working away tirelessly through the long desert afternoons. Powers had watched him from his office window at the far end of the Neurology wing, carefully marking out his pegs and string, carrying away the cement chips in a small canvas bucket. After Whitby's suicide no one had bothered about the grooves, but Powers often borrowed the supervisor's key and let himself into the disused pool, and would look down at the labyrinth of mouldering gulleys, half-filled with water leaking in from the chlorinator, an enigma now past any solution.

Initially, however, Powers was too preoccupied with completing his work at the Clinic and planning his own final withdrawal. After the first frantic weeks of panic he had managed to accept an uneasy compromise that allowed him to view his predicament with the detached fatalism he had previously reserved for his patients. Fortunately he was moving down the physical and mental gradients simultaneously – lethargy and inertia blunted his anxieties, a slackening metabolism made it necessary to concentrate to produce a connected thought-train. In fact, the lengthening intervals of dreamless sleep were almost restful. He found himself beginning to look forward to them, and made no effort to wake earlier than was essential.

At first he had kept an alarm clock by his bed, tried to compress as much activity as he could into the narrowing hours of consciousness, sorting out his library, driving over to Whitby's laboratory every morning to examine the latest batch of X-ray plates, every minute and hour rationed like the last drops of water in a canteen.

Anderson, fortunately, had unwittingly made him realize the pointlessness of this course.

After Powers had resigned from the Clinic he still continued to drive in once a week for his check-up, now little more than a formality. On what turned out to be the last occasion Anderson had perfunctorily taken his

blood-count, noting Powers' slacker facial muscles, fading pupil reflexes and unshaven cheeks.

He smiled sympathetically at Powers across the desk, wondering what to say to him. Once he had put on a show of encouragement with the more intelligent patients, even tried to provide some sort of explanation. But Powers was too difficult to reach – neurosurgeon extraordinary, a man always out on the periphery, only at ease working with unfamiliar materials. To himself he thought: *I'm sorry, Robert. What can I say – 'Even the sun is growing cooler' –?* He watched Powers drum his fingers restlessly on the enamel desk top, his eyes glancing at the spinal level charts hung around the office. Despite his unkempt appearance – he had been wearing the same unironed shirt and dirty white plimsolls a week ago – Powers looked composed and self-possessed, like a Conradian beachcomber more or less reconciled to his own weaknesses.

'What are you doing with yourself, Robert?' he asked. 'Are you still going over to Whitby's lab?'

'As much as I can. It takes me half an hour to cross the lake, and I keep on sleeping through the alarm clock. I may leave my place and move in there permanently.'

Anderson frowned. 'Is there much point? As far as I could make out Whitby's work was pretty speculative –' He broke off, realizing the implied criticism of Powers' own disastrous work at the Clinic, but Powers seemed to ignore this, was examining the pattern of shadows on the ceiling. 'Anyway, wouldn't it be better to stay where you are, among your own things, read through Toynbee and Spengler again?'

Powers laughed shortly. 'That's the last thing I want to do. I want to *forget* Toynbee and Spengler, not try to remember them. In fact, Paul, I'd like to forget everything. I don't know whether I've got enough time, though. How much can you forget in three months?'

'Everything, I suppose, if you want to. But don't try to race the clock.'

Powers nodded quietly, repeating this last remark to himself. Racing the clock was exactly what he had been doing. As he stood up and said goodbye to Anderson he suddenly decided to throw away his alarm clock, escape from his futile obsession with time. To remind himself he unfastened his wristwatch and scrambled the setting, then slipped it into his pocket. Making his way out to the car park he reflected on the freedom this simple act gave him. He would explore the lateral byways now, the side doors, as it were, in the corridors of time. Three months could be an eternity.

He picked his car out of the line and strolled over to it, shielding his eyes from the heavy sunlight beating down across the parabolic sweep of the lecture theatre roof. He was about to climb in when he saw that someone had traced with a finger across the dust caked over the windshield:

96,688,365,498,721

Looking over his shoulder, he recognized the white Packard parked next to him, peered inside and saw a lean-faced young man with blond sun-bleached hair and a high cerebrotonic forehead watching him behind dark glasses. Sitting beside him at the wheel was a raven-haired girl whom he had often seen around the psychology department. She had intelligent but somehow rather oblique eyes, and Powers remembered that the younger doctors called her 'the girl from Mars'.

'Hello, Kaldren,' Powers said to the young man. 'Still following me around?'

Kaldren nodded. 'Most of the time, doctor.' He sized Powers up shrewdly. 'We haven't seen very much of you recently, as a matter of fact. Anderson said you'd resigned, and we noticed your laboratory was closed.'

Powers shrugged. 'I felt I needed a rest. As you'll understand, there's a good deal that needs re-thinking.'

Kaldren frowned half-mockingly. 'Sorry to hear that, doctor. But don't let these temporary setbacks depress you.' He noticed the girl watching Powers with interest. 'Coma's a fan of yours. I gave her your papers from *American Journal of Psychiatry*, and she's read through the whole file.'

The girl smiled pleasantly at Powers, for a moment dispelling the hostility between the two men. When Powers nodded to her she leaned across Kaldren and said: 'Actually I've just finished Noguchi's autobiography – the great Japanese doctor who discovered the spirochaete. Somehow you remind me of him – there's so much of yourself in all the patients you worked on.'

Powers smiled wanly at her, then his eyes turned and locked involuntarily on Kaldren's. They stared at each other sombrely for a moment, and a small tic in Kaldren's right cheek began to flicker irritatingly. He flexed his facial muscles, after a few seconds mastered it with an effort, obviously annoyed that Powers should have witnessed this brief embarrassment.

'How did the clinic go today?' Powers asked. 'Have you had any more . . . headaches?'

Kaldren's mouth snapped shut, he looked suddenly irritable. 'Whose care am I in, doctor? Yours or Anderson's? Is that the sort of question you should be asking now?'

Powers gestured deprecatingly. 'Perhaps not.' He cleared his throat; the heat was ebbing the blood from his head and he felt tired and eager to get away from them. He turned towards his car, then realized that Kaldren would probably follow, either try to crowd him into the ditch or block the road and make Powers sit in his dust all the way back to the lake. Kaldren was capable of any madness.

'Well, I've got to go and collect something,' he said, adding in a firmer voice: 'Get in touch with me, though, if you can't reach Anderson.'

He waved and walked off behind the line of cars. From the reflection in the windows he could see Kaldren looking back and watching him closely.

He entered the Neurology wing, paused thankfully in the cool foyer, nodding to the two nurses and the armed guard at the reception desk. For some reason the terminals sleeping in the adjacent dormitory block attracted hordes of would-be sightseers, most of them cranks with some magical anti-narcoma remedy, or merely the idly curious, but a good number of quite normal people, many of whom had travelled thousands of miles, impelled towards the Clinic by some strange instinct, like animals migrating to a preview of their racial graveyards.

He walked along the corridor to the supervisor's office overlooking the recreation deck, borrowed the key and made his way out through the tennis courts and callisthenics rigs to the enclosed swimming pool at the far end. It had been disused for months, and only Powers' visits kept the lock free. Stepping through, he closed it behind him and walked past the peeling wooden stands to the deep end.

Putting a foot up on the diving board, he looked down at Whitby's ideogram. Damp leaves and bits of paper obscured it, but the outlines were just distinguishable. It covered almost the entire floor of the pool and at first glance appeared to represent a huge solar disc, with four radiating diamond-shaped arms, a crude Jungian mandala.

Wondering what had prompted Whitby to carve the device before his death, Powers noticed something moving through the debris in the centre of the disc. A black, horny-shelled animal about a foot long was nosing about in the slush, heaving itself on tired legs. Its shell was articulated, and vaguely resembled an armadillo's. Reaching the edge of the disc, it stopped and hesitated, then slowly backed away into the centre again, apparently unwilling or unable to cross the narrow groove.

Powers looked around, then stepped into one of the changing stalls and pulled a small wooden clothes locker off its rusty wall bracket. Carrying it under one arm, he climbed down the chromium ladder into the pool and walked carefully across the slithery floor towards the animal. As he approached it sidled away from him, but he trapped it easily, using the lid to lever it into the box.

The animal was heavy, at least the weight of a brick. Powers tapped its massive olive-black carapace with his knuckle, noting the triangular warty head jutting out below its rim like a turtle's, the thickened pads beneath the first digits of the pentadactyl forelimbs.

He watched the three-lidded eyes blinking at him anxiously from the bottom of the box.

'Expecting some really hot weather?' he murmured. 'That lead umbrella you're carrying around should keep you cool.'

He closed the lid, climbed out of the pool and made his way back to the supervisor's office, then carried the box out to his car.

'. . . Kaldren continues to reproach me (Powers wrote in his diary). For some reason he seems unwilling to accept his isolation, is elaborating a series of private rituals to replace the missing hours of sleep. Perhaps

I should tell him of my own approaching zero, but he'd probably regard this as the final unbearable insult, that I should have in excess what he so desperately yearns for. God knows what might happen. Fortunately the nightmarish visions appear to have receded for the time being . . .'

Pushing the diary away, Powers leaned forward across the desk and stared out through the window at the white floor of the lake bed stretching towards the hills along the horizon. Three miles away, on the far shore, he could see the circular bowl of the radio-telescope revolving slowly in the clear afternoon air, as Kaldren tirelessly trapped the sky, sluicing in millions of cubic parsecs of sterile ether, like the nomads who trapped the sea along the shores of the Persian Gulf.

Behind him the air-conditioner murmured quietly, cooling the pale blue walls half-hidden in the dim light. Outside the air was bright and oppressive, the heat waves rippling up from the clumps of gold-tinted cacti below the Clinic blurring the sharp terraces of the twenty-storey Neurology block. There, in the silent dormitories behind the sealed shutters, the terminals slept their long dreamless sleep. There were now over 500 of them in the Clinic, the vanguard of a vast somnambulist army massing for its last march. Only five years had elapsed since the first narcoma syndrome had been recognized, but already huge government hospitals in the east were being readied for intakes in the thousands, as more and more cases came to light.

Powers felt suddenly tired, and glanced at his wrist, wondering how long he had to 8 o'clock, his bedtime for the next week or so. Already he missed the dusk, soon would wake to his last dawn.

His watch was in his hip-pocket. He remembered his decision not to use his timepieces, and sat back and stared at the bookshelves beside the desk. There were rows of green-covered AEC publications he had removed from Whitby's library, papers in which the biologist described his work out in the Pacific after the H-tests. Many of them Powers knew almost by heart, read a hundred times in an effort to grasp Whitby's last conclusions. Toynbee would certainly be easier to forget.

His eyes dimmed momentarily, as the tall black wall in the rear of his mind cast its great shadow over his brain. He reached for the diary, thinking of the girl in Kaldren's car – Coma he had called her, another of his insane jokes – and her reference to Noguchi. Actually the comparison should have been made with Whitby, not himself; the monsters in the lab were nothing more than fragmented mirrors of Whitby's mind, like the grotesque radio-shielded frog he had found that morning in the swimming pool.

Thinking of the girl Coma, and the heartening smile she had given him, he wrote:

Woke 6-33 am. Last session with Anderson. He made it plain he's seen

enough of me, and from now on I'm better alone. To sleep 8-00? (these countdowns terrify me.)

He paused, then added:

Goodbye, Eniwetok.

TWO

He saw the girl again the next day at Whitby's laboratory. He had driven over after breakfast with the new specimen, eager to get it into a vivarium before it died. The only previous armoured mutant he had come across had nearly broken his neck. Speeding along the lake road a month or so earlier he had struck it with the offside front wheel, expecting the small creature to flatten instantly. Instead its hard lead-packed shell had remained rigid, even though the organism within it had been pulped, had flung the car heavily into the ditch. He had gone back for the shell, later weighed it at the laboratory, found it contained over 600 grammes of lead.

Quite a number of plants and animals were building up heavy metals as radiological shields. In the hills behind the beach house a couple of old-time prospectors were renovating the derelict gold-panning equipment abandoned over eighty years ago. They had noticed the bright yellow tints of the cacti, run an analysis and found that the plants were assimilating gold in extractable quantities, although the soil concentrations were unworkable. Oak Ridge was at last paying a dividend!!

Waking that morning just after 6-45 – ten minutes later than the previous day (he had switched on the radio, heard one of the regular morning programmes as he climbed out of bed) – he had eaten a light unwanted breakfast, then spent an hour packing away some of the books in his library, crating them up and taping on address labels to his brother.

He reached Whitby's laboratory half an hour later. This was housed in a 100-foot-wide geodesic dome built beside his chalet on the west shore of the lake about a mile from Kaldren's summer house. The chalet had been closed after Whitby's suicide, and many of the experimental plants and animals had died before Powers had managed to receive permission to use the laboratory.

As he turned into the driveway he saw the girl standing on the apex of the yellow-ribbed dome, her slim figure silhouetted against the sky. She waved to him, then began to step down across the glass polyhedrons and jumped nimbly into the driveway beside the car.

'Hello,' she said, giving him a welcoming smile. 'I came over to see your zoo. Kaldren said you wouldn't let me in if he came so I made him stay behind.'

She waited for Powers to say something while he searched for his keys, then volunteered: 'If you like, I can wash your shirt.'

Powers grinned at her, peered down ruefully at his dust-stained sleeves. 'Not a bad idea. I thought I was beginning to look a little uncared-for.' He unlocked the door, took Coma's arm. 'I don't know why Kaldren told you that – he's welcome here any time he likes.'

'What have you got in there?' Coma asked, pointing at the wooden box he was carrying as they walked between the gear-laden benches.

'A distant cousin of ours I found. Interesting little chap. I'll introduce you in a moment.'

Sliding partitions divided the dome into four chambers. Two of them were storerooms, filled with spare tanks, apparatus, cartons of animal food and test rigs. They crossed the third section, almost filled by a powerful X-ray projector, a giant 250 amp G.E. Maxitron, angled on to a revolving table, concrete shielding blocks lying around ready for use like huge building bricks.

The fourth chamber contained Powers' zoo, the vivaria jammed together along the benches and in the sinks, big coloured cardboard charts and memos pinned on to the draught hoods above them, a tangle of rubber tubing and power leads trailing across the floor. As they walked past the lines of tanks dim forms shifted behind the frosted glass, and at the far end of the aisle there was a sudden scurrying in a large cage by Powers' desk.

Putting the box down on his chair, he picked a packet of peanuts off the desk and went over to the cage. A small black-haired chimpanzee wearing a dented jet pilot's helmet swarmed deftly up the bars to him, chirped happily and then jumped down to a miniature control panel against the rear wall of the cage. Rapidly it flicked a series of buttons and toggles, and a succession of coloured lights lit up like a juke box and jangled out a two-second blast of music.

'Good boy,' Powers said encouragingly, patting the chimp's back and shovelling the peanuts into its hands. 'You're getting much too clever for that one, aren't you?'

The chimp tossed the peanuts into the back of its throat with the smooth, easy motions of a conjuror, jabbering at Powers in a sing-song voice.

Coma laughed and took some of the nuts from Powers. 'He's sweet. I think he's talking to you.'

Powers nodded. 'Quite right, he is. Actually he's got a two-hundred-word vocabulary, but his voice box scrambles it all up.' He opened a small refrigerator by the desk, took out half a packet of sliced bread and passed a couple of pieces to the chimp. It picked an electric toaster off the floor and placed it in the middle of a low wobbling table in the centre of the cage, whipped the pieces into the slots. Powers pressed a tab on the switchboard beside the cage and the toaster began to crackle softly.

'He's one of the brightest we've had here, about as intelligent as a five-year-old child, though much more self-sufficient in a lot of ways.' The two pieces of toast jumped out of their slots and the chimp caught them neatly, nonchalantly patting its helmet each time, then ambled off into a small ramshackle kennel and relaxed back with one arm out of a window, sliding the toast into its mouth.

'He built that house himself,' Powers went on, switching off the toaster. 'Not a bad effort, really.' He pointed to a yellow polythene bucket by the front door of the kennel, from which a battered-looking geranium protruded. 'Tends that plant, cleans up the cage, pours out an endless stream of wisecracks. Pleasant fellow all round.'

Coma was smiling broadly to herself. 'Why the space helmet, though?'

Powers hesitated. 'Oh, it – er – it's for his own protection. Sometimes he gets rather bad headaches. His predecessors all –' He broke off and turned away. 'Let's have a look at some of the other inmates.'

He moved down the line of tanks, beckoning Coma with him. 'We'll start at the beginning.' He lifted the glass lid off one of the tanks, and Coma peered down into a shallow bath of water, where a small round organism with slender tendrils was nestling in a rockery of shells and pebbles.

'Sea anemone. Or was. Simple coelenterate with an open-ended body cavity.' He pointed down to a thickened ridge of tissue around the base. 'It's sealed up the cavity, converted the channel into a rudimentary notochord, first plant ever to develop a nervous system. Later the tendrils will knot themselves into a ganglion, but already they're sensitive to colour. Look.' He borrowed the violet handkerchief in Coma's breast-pocket, spread it across the tank. The tendrils flexed and stiffened, began to weave slowly, as if they were trying to focus.

'The strange thing is that they're completely insensitive to white light. Normally the tendrils register shifting pressure gradients, like the tympanic diaphragms in your ears. Now it's almost as if they can *hear* primary colours, suggests it's re-adapting itself for a non-aquatic existence in a static world of violent colour contrasts.'

Coma shook her head, puzzled. 'Why, though?'

'Hold on a moment. Let me put you in the picture first.' They moved along the bench to a series of drum-shaped cages made of wire mosquito netting. Above the first was a large white cardboard screen bearing a blown-up microphoto of a tall pagoda-like chain, topped by the legend: 'Drosophila: 15 röntgens/min.'

Powers tapped a small perspex window in the drum. 'Fruitfly. Its huge chromosomes make it a useful test vehicle.' He bent down, pointed to a grey V-shaped honeycomb suspended from the roof. A few flies emerged from entrances, moving about busily. 'Usually it's solitary, a nomadic scavenger. Now it forms itself into well-knit social groups, has begun to secrete a thin sweet lymph something like honey.'

'What's this?' Coma asked, touching the screen.

'Diagram of a key gene in the operation.' He traced a spray of arrows

leading from a link in the chain. The arrows were labelled: 'Lymph gland' and subdivided 'sphincter muscles, epithelium, templates.'

'It's rather like the perforated sheet music of a player-piano,' Powers commented, 'or a computer punch tape. Knock out one link with an X-ray beam, lose a characteristic, change the score.'

Coma was peering through the window of the next cage and pulling an unpleasant face. Over her shoulder Powers saw she was watching an enormous spider-like insect, as big as a hand, its dark hairy legs as thick as fingers. The compound eyes had been built up so that they resembled giant rubies.

'He looks unfriendly,' she said. 'What's that sort of rope ladder he's spinning?' As she moved a finger to her mouth the spider came to life, retreated into the cage and began spewing out a complex skein of interlinked grey thread which it slung in long loops from the roof of the cage.

'A web,' Powers told her. 'Except that it consists of nervous tissue. The ladders form an external neural plexus, an inflatable brain as it were, that he can pump up to whatever size the situation calls for. A sensible arrangement, really, far better than our own.'

Coma backed away. 'Gruesome. I wouldn't like to go into his parlour.'

'Oh, he's not as frightening as he looks. Those huge eyes staring at you are blind. Or, rather, their optical sensitivity has shifted down the band, the retinas will only register gamma radiation. Your wristwatch has luminous hands. When you moved it across the window he started thinking. World War IV should really bring him into his element.'

They strolled back to Powers' desk. He put a coffee pan over a bunsen and pushed a chair across to Coma. Then he opened the box, lifted out the armoured frog and put it down on a sheet of blotting paper.

'Recognize him? Your old childhood friend, the common frog. He's built himself quite a solid little air-raid shelter.' He carried the animal across to a sink, turned on the tap and let the water play softly over its shell. Wiping his hands on his shirt, he came back to the desk.

Coma brushed her long hair off her forehead, watched him curiously.

'Well, what's the secret?'

Powers lit a cigarette. 'There's no secret. Teratologists have been breeding monsters for years. Have you ever heard of the "silent pair"?'

She shook her head.

Powers stared moodily at the cigarette for a moment, riding the kick the first one of the day always gave him. 'The so-called "silent pair" is one of modern genetics' oldest problems, the apparently baffling mystery of the two inactive genes which occur in a small percentage of all living organisms, and appear to have no intelligible role in their structure or development. For a long while now biologists have been trying to activate them, but the difficulty is partly in identifying the silent genes in the fertilized germ cells of parents known to contain them, and partly in focusing a narrow enough X-ray beam which will do no damage to the

remainder of the chromosome. However, after about ten years' work Dr Whitby successfully developed a whole-body irradiation technique based on his observation of radiobiological damage at Eniwetok.'

Powers paused for a moment. 'He had noticed that there appeared to be more biological damage after the tests – that is, a greater transport of energy – than could be accounted for by direct radiation. What was happening was that the protein lattices in the genes were building up energy in the way that any vibrating membrane accumulates energy when it resonates – you remember the analogy of the bridge collapsing under the soldiers marching in step – and it occurred to him that if he could first identify the critical resonance frequency of the lattices in any particular silent gene he could then radiate the entire living organism, and not simply its germ cells, with a low field that would act selectively on the silent gene and cause no damage to the remainder of the chromosomes, whose lattices would resonate critically only at other specific frequencies.'

Powers gestured around the laboratory with his cigarette. 'You see some of the fruits of this "resonance transfer" technique around you.'

Coma nodded. 'They've had their silent genes activated?'

'Yes, all of them. These are only a few of the thousands of specimens who have passed through here, and as you've seen, the results are pretty dramatic.'

He reached up and pulled across a section of the sun curtain. They were sitting just under the lip of the dome, and the mounting sunlight had begun to irritate him.

In the comparative darkness Coma noticed a stroboscope winking slowly in one of the tanks at the end of the bench behind her. She stood up and went over to it, examining a tall sunflower with a thickened stem and greatly enlarged receptacle. Packed around the flower, so that only its head protruded, was a chimney of grey-white stones, neatly cemented together and labelled:

Cretaceous Chalk: 60,000,000 years

Beside it on the bench were three other chimneys, these labelled 'Devonian Sandstone: 290,000,000 years', 'Asphalt: 20 years', 'Polyvinyl-chloride: 6 months'.

'Can you see those moist white discs on the sepals,' Powers pointed out. 'In some way they regulate the plant's metabolism. It literally *sees* time. The older the surrounding environment, the more sluggish its metabolism. With the asphalt chimney it will complete its annual cycle in a week, with the PVC one in a couple of hours.'

'Sees time,' Coma repeated, wonderingly. She looked up at Powers, chewing her lower lip reflectively. 'It's fantastic. Are these the creatures of the future, doctor?'

'I don't know,' Powers admitted. 'But if they are their world must be a monstrous surrealist one.'

THREE

He went back to the desk, pulled two cups from a drawer and poured out the coffee, switching off the bunsen. 'Some people have speculated that organisms possessing the silent pair of genes are the forerunners of a massive move up the evolutionary slope, that the silent genes are a sort of code, a divine message that we inferior organisms are carrying for our more highly developed descendants. It may well be true – perhaps we've broken the code too soon.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Well, as Whitby's death indicates, the experiments in this laboratory have all come to a rather unhappy conclusion. Without exception the organisms we've irradiated have entered a final phase of totally disorganized growth, producing dozens of specialized sensory organs whose function we can't even guess. The results are catastrophic – the anemone will literally explode, the Drosophila cannibalize themselves, and so on. Whether the future implicit in these plants and animals is ever intended to take place, or whether we're merely extrapolating – I don't know. Sometimes I think, though, that the new sensory organs developed are parodies of their real intentions. The specimens you've seen today are all in an early stage of their secondary growth cycles. Later on they begin to look distinctly bizarre.'

Coma nodded. 'A zoo isn't complete without its keeper,' she commented. 'What about Man?'

Powers shrugged. 'About one in every 100,000 – the usual average – contain the silent pair. You might have them – or I. No one has volunteered yet to undergo whole-body irradiation. Apart from the fact that it would be classified as suicide, if the experiments here are any guide the experience would be savage and violent.'

He sipped at the thin coffee, feeling tired and somehow bored. Recapitulating the laboratory's work had exhausted him.

The girl leaned forward. 'You look awfully pale,' she said solicitously. 'Don't you sleep well?'

Powers managed a brief smile. 'Too well,' he admitted. 'It's no longer a problem with me.'

'I wish I could say that about Kaldren. I don't think he sleeps anywhere near enough. I hear him pacing around all night.' She added: 'Still, I suppose it's better than being a terminal. Tell me, doctor, wouldn't it be worth trying this radiation technique on the sleepers at the Clinic? It might wake them up before the end. A few of them must possess the silent genes.'

'They *all* do,' Powers told her. 'The two phenomena are very closely linked, as a matter of fact.' He stopped, fatigue dulling his brain, and wondered whether to ask the girl to leave. Then he climbed off the desk and reached behind it, picked up a tape-recorder.

Switching it on, he zeroed the tape and adjusted the speaker volume.

'Whitby and I often talked this over. Towards the end I took it all down. He was a great biologist, so let's hear it in his own words. It's absolutely the heart of the matter.'

He flipped the table on, adding: 'I've played it over to myself a thousand times, so I'm afraid the quality is poor.'

An older man's voice, sharp and slightly irritable, sounded out above a low buzz of distortion, but Coma could hear it clearly.

WHITBY: . . . for heaven's sake, Robert, look at those FAO statistics. Despite an annual increase of five per cent in acreage sown over the past fifteen years, world wheat crops have continued to decline by a factor of about two per cent. The same story repeats itself *ad nauseam*. Cereals and root crops, dairy yields, ruminant fertility – are all down. Couple these with a mass of parallel symptoms, anything you care to pick from altered migratory routes to longer hibernation periods, and the overall pattern is incontrovertible.

POWERS: Population figures for Europe and North America show no decline, though.

WHITBY: Of course not, as I keep pointing out. It will take a century for such a fractional drop in fertility to have any effect in areas where extensive birth control provides an artificial reservoir. One must look at the countries of the Far East, and particularly at those where infant mortality has remained at a steady level. The population of Sumatra, for example, has declined by over fifteen per cent in the last twenty years. A fabulous decline! Do you realize that only two or three decades ago the Neo-Malthusians were talking about a 'world population explosion'? In fact, it's an implosion. Another factor is –

Here the tape had been cut and edited, and Whitby's voice, less querulous this time, picked up again.

. . . just as a matter of interest, tell me something: how long do you sleep each night?

POWERS: I don't know exactly; about eight hours, I suppose.

WHITBY: The proverbial eight hours. Ask anyone and they say automatically 'eight hours'. As a matter of fact you sleep about ten and a half hours, like the majority of people. I've timed you on a number of occasions. I myself sleep eleven. Yet thirty years ago people did indeed sleep eight hours, and a century before that they slept six or seven. In Vasari's *Lives* one reads of Michelangelo sleeping for only four or five hours, painting all day at the age of eighty and then working through the night over his anatomy table

with a candle strapped to his forehead. Now he's regarded as a prodigy, but it was unremarkable then. How do you think the ancients, from Plato to Shakespeare, Aristotle to Aquinas, were able to cram so much work into their lives? Simply because they had an extra six or seven hours every day. Of course, a second disadvantage under which we labour is a lowered basal metabolic rate – another factor no one will explain.

POWERS: I suppose you could take the view that the lengthened sleep interval is a compensation device, a sort of mass neurotic attempt to escape from the terrifying pressures of urban life in the late twentieth century.

WHITBY: You could, but you'd be wrong. It's simply a matter of biochemistry. The ribonucleic acid templates which unravel the protein chains in all living organisms are wearing out, the dies inscribing the protoplasmic signature have become blunted. After all, they've been running now for over a thousand million years. It's time to re-tool. Just as an individual organism's life span is finite, or the life of a yeast colony or a given species, so the life of an entire biological kingdom is of fixed duration. It's always been assumed that the evolutionary slope reaches forever upwards, but in fact the peak has already been reached, and the pathway now leads downwards to the common biological grave. It's a despairing and at present unacceptable vision of the future, but it's the only one. Five thousand centuries from now our descendants, instead of being multi-brained star-men, will probably be naked prognathous idiots with hair on their foreheads, grunting their way through the remains of this Clinic like Neolithic men caught in a macabre inversion of time. Believe me, I pity them, as I pity myself. My total failure, my absolute lack of any moral or biological right to existence, is implicit in every cell of my body . . .

The tape ended, the spool ran free and stopped. Powers closed the machine, then massaged his face. Coma sat quietly, watching him and listening to the chimp playing with a box of puzzle dice.

'As far as Whitby could tell,' Powers said, 'the silent genes represent a last desperate effort of the biological kingdom to keep its head above the rising waters. Its total life period is determined by the amount of radiation emitted by the sun, and once this reaches a certain point the sure-death line has been passed and extinction is inevitable. To compensate for this, alarms have been built in which alter the form of the organism and adapt it to living in a hotter radiological climate. Soft-skinned organisms develop hard shells, these contain heavy metals as radiation screens. New organs of perception are developed too. According to Whitby, though, it's all wasted effort in the long run – but sometimes I wonder.'

He smiled at Coma and shrugged. 'Well, let's talk about something else. How long have you known Kaldren?'

'About three weeks. Feels like ten thousand years.'

'How do you find him now? We've been rather out of touch lately.'

Coma grinned. 'I don't seem to see very much of him either. He makes me sleep all the time. Kaldren has many strange talents, but he lives just for himself. You mean a lot to him, doctor. In fact, you're my one serious rival.'

'I thought he couldn't stand the sight of me.'

'Oh, that's just a sort of surface symptom. He really thinks of you continually. That's why we spend all our time following you around.' She eyed Powers shrewdly. 'I think he feels guilty about something.'

'Guilty?' Powers exclaimed. '*He* does? I thought I was supposed to be the guilty one.'

'Why?' she pressed. She hesitated, then said: 'You carried out some experimental surgical technique on him, didn't you?'

'Yes,' Powers admitted. 'It wasn't altogether a success, like so much of what I seem to be involved with. If Kaldren feels guilty, I suppose it's because he feels he must take some of the responsibility.'

He looked down at the girl, her intelligent eyes watching him closely. 'For one or two reasons it may be necessary for you to know. You said Kaldren paced around all night and didn't get enough sleep. Actually he doesn't get any sleep at all.'

The girl nodded. 'You . . .' She made a snapping gesture with her fingers.

'. . . narcotomized him,' Powers completed. 'Surgically speaking, it was a great success, one might well share a Nobel for it. Normally the hypothalamus regulates the period of sleep, raising the threshold of consciousness in order to relax the venous capillaries in the brain and drain them of accumulating toxins. However, by sealing off some of the control loops the subject is unable to receive the sleep cue, and the capillaries drain while he remains conscious. All he feels is a temporary lethargy, but this passes within three or four hours. Physically speaking, Kaldren has had another twenty years added to his life. But the psyche seems to need sleep for its own private reasons, and consequently Kaldren has periodic storms that tear him apart. The whole thing was a tragic blunder.'

Coma frowned pensively. 'I guessed as much. Your papers in the neurosurgery journals referred to the patient as K. A touch of pure Kafka that came all too true.'

'I may leave here for good, Coma,' Powers said. 'Make sure that Kaldren goes to his clinics. Some of the deep scar tissue will need to be cleaned away.'

'I'll try. Sometimes I feel I'm just another of his insane terminal documents.'

'What are those?'

'Haven't you heard? Kaldren's collection of final statements about *homo sapiens*. The complete works of Freud, Beethoven's blind quartets, transcripts of the Nuremberg trials, an automatic novel, and so on.' She broke off. 'What's that you're drawing?'

'Where?'

She pointed to the desk blotter, and Powers looked down and realized he had been unconsciously sketching an elaborate doodle, Whitby's four-armed sun. 'It's nothing,' he said. Somehow, though, it had a strangely compelling force.

Coma stood up to leave. 'You must come and see us, doctor. Kaldren has so much he wants to show you. He's just got hold of an old copy of the last signals sent back by the Mercury Seven twenty years ago when they reached the moon, and can't think about anything else. You remember the strange messages they recorded before they died, full of poetic ramblings about the white gardens. Now that I think about it they behaved rather like the plants in your zoo here.'

She put her hands in her pockets, then pulled something out. 'By the way, Kaldren asked me to give you this.'

It was an old index card from the observatory library. In the centre had been typed the number:

96,688,365,498,720

'It's going to take a long time to reach zero at this rate,' Powers remarked dryly. 'I'll have quite a collection when we're finished.'

After she had left he chucked the card into the waste bin and sat down at the desk, staring for an hour at the ideogram on the blotter.

Halfway back to his beach house the lake road forked to the left through a narrow saddle that ran between the hills to an abandoned Air Force weapons range on one of the remoter salt lakes. At the nearer end were a number of small bunkers and camera towers, one or two metal shacks and a low-roofed storage hangar. The white hills encircled the whole area, shutting it off from the world outside, and Powers liked to wander on foot down the gunnery aisles that had been marked down the two-mile length of the lake towards the concrete sight-screens at the far end. The abstract patterns made him feel like an ant on a bone-white chess-board, the rectangular screens at one end and the towers and bunkers at the other like opposing pieces.

His session with Coma had made Powers feel suddenly dissatisfied with the way he was spending his last months. *Goodbye, Eniwetok*, he had written, but in fact systematically forgetting everything was exactly the same as remembering it, a cataloguing in reverse, sorting out all the books in the mental library and putting them back in their right places upside down.

Powers climbed one of the camera towers, leaned on the rail and looked out along the aisles towards the sight-screens. Ricocheting shells and rockets had chipped away large pieces of the circular concrete bands that ringed the target bulls, but the outlines of the huge 100-yard-wide discs, alternately painted blue and red, were still visible.

For half an hour he stared quietly at them, formless ideas shifting through his mind. Then, without thinking, he abruptly left the rail and climbed down the companionway. The storage hangar was fifty yards away. He walked quickly across to it, stepped into the cool shadows and peered around the rusting electric trolleys and empty flare drums. At the far end, behind a pile of lumber and bales of wire, were a stack of unopened cement bags, a mound of dirty sand and an old mixer.

Half an hour later he had backed the Buick into the hangar and hooked the cement mixer, charged with sand, cement and water scavenged from the drums lying around outside, on to the rear bumper, then loaded a dozen more bags into the car's trunk and rear seat. Finally he selected a few straight lengths of timber, jammed them through the window and set off across the lake towards the central target bull.

For the next two hours he worked away steadily in the centre of the great blue disc, mixing up the cement by hand, carrying it across to the crude wooden forms he had lashed together from the timber, smoothing it down so that it formed a six-inch high wall around the perimeter of the bull. He worked without pause, stirring the cement with a tyre lever, scooping it out with a hub-cap prised off one of the wheels.

By the time he finished and drove off, leaving his equipment where it stood, he had completed a thirty-foot-long section of wall.

FOUR

June 7: Conscious, for the first time, of the brevity of each day. As long as I was awake for over twelve hours I still orientated my time around the meridian, morning and afternoon set their old rhythms. Now, with just over eleven hours of consciousness left, they form a continuous interval, like a length of tape-measure. I can see exactly how much is left on the spool and can do little to affect the rate at which it unwinds. Spend the time slowly packing away the library; the crates are too heavy to move and lie where they are filled.
Cell count down to 400,000.
Woke 8-10. To sleep 7-15. (Appear to have lost my watch without realizing it, had to drive into town to buy another.)

June 14: 9½ hours. Time races, flashing past like an expressway. However, the last week of a holiday always goes faster than the first. At the present rate there should be about 4–5 weeks left. This morning I tried to visualize what the last week or so – the final, 3, 2, 1, out – would be like, had a sudden chilling attack of pure fear, unlike anything I've ever felt before. Took me half an hour to steady myself for an intravenous.
Kaldren pursues me like my luminescent shadow, chalked up on the gateway '96,688,365,498,702'. Should confuse the mail man.
Woke 9-05. To sleep 6-36.

June 19: 8¾ hours. Anderson rang up this morning. I nearly put the phone down on him, but managed to go through the pretence of making the final arrangements. He congratulated me on my stoicism, even used the word 'heroic'. Don't feel it. Despair erodes everything – courage, hope, self-discipline, all the better qualities. It's so damned difficult to sustain that impersonal attitude of passive acceptance implicit in the scientific tradition. I try to think of Galileo before the Inquisition, Freud surmounting the endless pain of his jaw cancer surgery.

Met Kaldren down town, had a long discussion about the Mercury Seven. He's convinced that they refused to leave the moon deliberately, after the 'reception party' waiting for them had put them in the cosmic picture. They were told by the mysterious emissaries from Orion that the exploration of deep space was pointless, that they were too late as the life of the universe is now virtually over!!! According to K. there are Air Force generals who take this nonsense seriously, but I suspect it's simply an obscure attempt on K.'s part to console me.

Must have the phone disconnected. Some contractor keeps calling me up about payment for 50 bags of cement he claims I collected ten days ago. Says he helped me load them on to a truck himself. I did drive Whitby's pick-up into town but only to get some lead screening. What does he think I'd do with all that cement? Just the sort of irritating thing you don't expect to hang over your final exit. (Moral: don't try too hard to forget Eniwetok.)

Woke 9-40. To sleep 4-15.

June 25: 7½ hours. Kaldren was snooping around the lab again today. Phoned me there, when I answered a recorded voice he'd rigged up rambled out a long string of numbers, like an insane super-Tim. These practical jokes of his get rather wearing. Fairly soon I'll have to go over and come to terms with him, much as I hate the prospect. Anyway, Miss Mars is a pleasure to look at.

One meal is enough now, topped up with a glucose shot. Sleep is still 'black', completely unrefreshing. Last night I took a 16 mm. film of the first three hours, screened it this morning at the lab. The first true horror movie, I looked like a half-animated corpse.

Woke 10-25. To sleep 3-45.

July 3: 5¾ hours. Little done today. Deepening lethargy, dragged myself over to the lab, nearly left the road twice. Concentrated enough to feed the zoo and get the log up to date. Read through the operating manuals Whitby left for the last time, decided on a delivery rate of 40 röntgens/min., target distance of 350 cm. Everything is ready now.

Woke 11-05. To sleep 3-15.

Powers stretched, shifted his head slowly across the pillow, focusing on the shadows cast on to the ceiling by the blind. Then he looked down at his feet, saw Kaldren sitting on the end of the bed, watching him quietly.

'Hello, doctor,' he said, putting out his cigarette. 'Late night? You look tired.'

Powers heaved himself on to one elbow, glanced at his watch. It was just after eleven. For a moment his brain blurred, and he swung his legs around and sat on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, massaging some life into his face.

He noticed that the room was full of smoke. 'What are you doing here?' he asked Kaldren.

'I came over to invite you to lunch.' He indicated the bedside phone. 'Your line was dead so I drove round. Hope you don't mind me climbing in. Rang the bell for about half an hour. I'm surprised you didn't hear it.'

Powers nodded, then stood up and tried to smooth the creases out of his cotton slacks. He had gone to sleep without changing for over a week, and they were damp and stale.

As he started for the bathroom door Kaldren pointed to the camera tripod on the other side of the bed. 'What's this? Going into the blue movie business, doctor?'

Powers surveyed him dimly for a moment, glanced at the tripod without replying and then noticed his open diary on the bedside table. Wondering whether Kaldren had read the last entries, he went back and picked it up, then stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

From the mirror cabinet he took out a syringe and an ampoule, after the shot leaned against the door waiting for the stimulant to pick up.

Kaldren was in the lounge when he returned to him, reading the labels on the crates lying about in the centre of the floor.

'Okay, then,' Powers told him, 'I'll join you for lunch.' He examined Kaldren carefully. He looked more subdued than usual, there was an air almost of deference about him.

'Good,' Kaldren said. 'By the way, are you leaving?'

'Does it matter?' Powers asked curtly. 'I thought you were in Anderson's care?'

Kaldren shrugged. 'Please yourself. Come round at about twelve,' he suggested, adding pointedly: 'That'll give you time to clean up and change. What's that all over your shirt? Looks like lime.'

Powers peered down, brushed at the white streaks. After Kaldren had left he threw the clothes away, took a shower and unpacked a clean suit from one of the trunks.

Until his liaison with Coma, Kaldren lived alone in the old abstract summer house on the north shore of the lake. This was a seven-storey folly originally built by an eccentric millionaire mathematician in the form of a spiralling concrete ribbon that wound around itself like an insane serpent, serving walls, floors and ceilings. Only Kaldren had solved the building, a geometric model of $\sqrt{-1}$, and consequently he had been able to take

it off the agents' hands at a comparatively low rent. In the evenings Powers had often watched him from the laboratory, striding restlessly from one level to the next, swinging through the labyrinth of inclines and terraces to the roof-top, where his lean angular figure stood out like a gallows against the sky, his lonely eyes sifting out radio lanes for the next day's trapping.

Powers noticed him there when he drove up at noon, poised on a ledge 150 feet above, head raised theatrically to the sky.

'Kaldren!' he shouted up suddenly into the silent air, half-hoping he might be jolted into losing his footing.

Kaldren broke out of his reverie and glanced down into the court. Grinning obliquely, he waved his right arm in a slow semi-circle.

'Come up,' he called, then turned back to the sky.

Powers leaned against the car. Once, a few months previously, he had accepted the same invitation, stepped through the entrance and within three minutes lost himself helplessly in a second-floor cul-de-sac. Kaldren had taken half an hour to find him.

Powers waited while Kaldren swung down from his eyrie, vaulting through the wells and stairways, then rode up in the elevator with him to the penthouse suite.

They carried their cocktails through into a wide glass-roofed studio, the huge white ribbon of concrete uncoiling around them like toothpaste squeezed from an enormous tube. On the staged levels running parallel and across them rested pieces of grey abstract furniture, giant photographs on angled screens, carefully labelled exhibits laid out on low tables, all dominated by twenty-foot-high black letters on the rear wall which spelt out the single vast word:

YOU

Kaldren pointed to it. 'What you might call the supraliminal approach.' He gestured Powers in conspiratorially, finishing his drink in a gulp. 'This is *my* laboratory, doctor,' he said with a note of pride. 'Much more significant than yours, believe me.'

Powers smiled wryly to himself and examined the first exhibit, an old EEG tape traversed by a series of faded inky wriggles. It was labelled: 'Einstein, A.; Alpha Waves, 1922.'

He followed Kaldren around, sipping slowly at his drink, enjoying the brief feeling of alertness the amphetamine provided. Within two hours it would fade, leave his brain feeling like a block of blotting paper.

Kaldren chattered away, explaining the significance of the so-called Terminal Documents. 'They're end-prints, Powers, final statements, the products of total fragmentation. When I've got enough together I'll build a new world for myself out of them.' He picked a thick paper-bound

volume off one of the tables, riffled through its pages. 'Association tests of the Nuremberg Twelve. I have to include these . . .'

Powers strolled on absently without listening. Over in the corner were what appeared to be three ticker-tape machines, lengths of tape hanging from their mouths. He wondered whether Kaldren was misguided enough to be playing the stock market, which had been declining slowly for twenty years.

'Powers,' he heard Kaldren say. 'I was telling you about the Mercury Seven.' He pointed to a collection of typewritten sheets tacked to a screen. 'These are transcripts of their final signals radioed back from the recording monitors.'

Powers examined the sheets cursorily, read a line at random.

'. . . BLUE . . . PEOPLE . . . RE-CYCLE . . . ORION . . . TELEMETERS . . .'

Powers nodded noncommittally. 'Interesting. What are the ticker tapes for over there?'

Kaldren grinned. 'I've been waiting for months for you to ask me that. Have a look.'

Powers went over and picked up one of the tapes. The machine was labelled: 'Auriga 225-G. Interval: 69 hours.'

The tape read:

96,688,365,498,695
96,688,365,498,694
96,688,365,498,693
96,688,365,498,692

Powers dropped the tape. 'Looks rather familiar. What does the sequence represent?'

Kaldren shrugged. 'No one knows.'

'What do you mean? It must replicate something.'

'Yes, it does. A diminishing mathematical progression. A countdown, if you like.'

Powers picked up the tape on the right, tabbed: 'Aries 44R951. Interval: 49 days.'

Here the sequence ran:

876,567,988,347,779,877,654,434
876,567,988,347,779,877,654,433
876,567,988,347,779,877,654,432

Powers looked round. 'How long does it take each signal to come through?'

'Only a few seconds. They're tremendously compressed laterally, of course. A computer at the observatory breaks them down. They were first picked up at Jodrell Bank about twenty years ago. Nobody bothers to listen to them now.'

Powers turned to the last tape.

6,554
6,553
6,552
6,551

'Nearing the end of its run,' he commented. He glanced at the label on the hood, which read: 'Unidentified radio source, Canes Venatici. Interval: 97 weeks.'

He showed the tape to Kaldren. 'Soon be over.'

Kaldren shook his head. He lifted a heavy directory-sized volume off a table, cradled it in his hands. His face had suddenly become sombre and haunted. 'I doubt it,' he said. 'Those are only the last four digits. The whole number contains over 50 million.'

He handed the volume to Powers, who turned to the title page. 'Master Sequence of Serial Signal received by Jodrell Bank Radio-Observatory, University of Manchester, England, 0012-59 hours, 21-5-72. Source: NGC 9743, Canes Venatici.' He thumbed the thick stack of closely printed pages, millions of numerals, as Kaldren had said, running up and down across a thousand consecutive pages.

Powers shook his head, picked up the tape again and stared at it thoughtfully.

'The computer only breaks down the last four digits,' Kaldren explained. 'The whole series comes over in each 15-second-long package, but it took IBM more than two years to unscramble one of them.'

'Amazing,' Powers commented. 'But what is it?'

'A countdown, as you can see. NGC 9743, somewhere in Canes Venatici. The big spirals there are breaking up, and they're saying goodbye. God knows who they think we are but they're letting us know all the same, beaming it out on the hydrogen line for everyone in the universe to hear.' He paused. 'Some people have put other interpretations on them, but there's one piece of evidence that rules out everything else.'

'Which is?'

Kaldren pointed to the last tape from Canes Venatici. 'Simply that it's been estimated that by the time this series reaches zero the universe will have just ended.'

Powers fingered the tape reflectively. 'Thoughtful of them to let us know what the real time is,' he remarked.

'I agree, it is,' Kaldren said quietly. 'Applying the inverse square law that signal source is broadcasting at a strength of about three million megawatts raised to the hundredth power. About the size of the entire Local Group. Thoughtful is the word.'

Suddenly he gripped Powers' arm, held it tightly and peered into his eyes closely, his throat working with emotion.

'You're not alone, Powers, don't think you are. These are the voices of

time, and they're all saying goodbye to you. Think of yourself in a wider context. Every particle in your body, every grain of sand, every galaxy carries the same signature. As you've just said, you know what the time is now, so what does the rest matter? There's no need to go on looking at the clock.'

Powers took his hand, squeezed it firmly. 'Thanks, Kaldren. I'm glad you understand.' He walked over to the window, looked down across the white lake. The tension between himself and Kaldren had dissipated, he felt that all his obligations to him had at last been met. Now he wanted to leave as quickly as possible, forget him as he had forgotten the faces of the countless other patients whose exposed brains had passed between his fingers.

He went back to the ticker machines, tore the tapes from their slots and stuffed them into his pockets. 'I'll take these along to remind myself. Say goodbye to Coma for me, will you.'

He moved towards the door, when he reached it looked back to see Kaldren standing in the shadow of the three giant letters on the far wall, his eyes staring listlessly at his feet.

As Powers drove away he noticed that Kaldren had gone up on to the roof, watched him in the driving mirror waving slowly until the car disappeared around a bend.

FIVE

The outer circle was now almost complete. A narrow segment, an arc about ten feet long, was missing, but otherwise the low perimeter wall ran continuously six inches off the concrete floor around the outer lane of the target bull, enclosing the huge rebus within it. Three concentric circles, the largest a hundred yards in diameter, separated from each other by ten-foot intervals, formed the rim of the device, divided into four segments by the arms of an enormous cross radiating from its centre, where a small round platform had been built a foot above the ground.

Powers worked swiftly, pouring sand and cement into the mixer, tipping in water until a rough paste formed, then carried it across to the wooden forms and tamped the mixture down into the narrow channel.

Within ten minutes he had finished, quickly dismantled the forms before the cement had set and slung the timbers into the back seat of the car. Dusting his hands on his trousers, he went over to the mixer and pushed it fifty yards away into the long shadow of the surrounding hills.

Without pausing to survey the gigantic cipher on which he had laboured patiently for so many afternoons, he climbed into the car and drove off on a wake of bone-white dust, splitting the pools of indigo shadow.

He reached the laboratory at three o'clock, jumped from the car as it lurched back on its brakes. Inside the entrance he first switched on the

lights, then hurried round, pulling the sun curtains down and shackling them to the floor slots, effectively turning the dome into a steel tent.

In their tanks behind him the plants and animals stirred quietly, responding to the sudden flood of cold fluorescent light. Only the chimpanzee ignored him. It sat on the floor of its cage, neurotically jamming the puzzle dice into the polythene bucket, exploding in bursts of sudden rage when the pieces refused to fit.

Powers went over to it, noticing the shattered glass fibre reinforcing panels bursting from the dented helmet. Already the chimp's face and forehead were bleeding from self-inflicted blows. Powers picked up the remains of the geranium that had been hurled through the bars, attracted the chimp's attention with it, then tossed a black pellet he had taken from a capsule in the desk drawer. The chimp caught it with a quick flick of the wrist, for a few seconds juggled the pellet with a couple of dice as it concentrated on the puzzle, then pulled it out of the air and swallowed it in a gulp.

Without waiting, Powers slipped off his jacket and stepped towards the X-ray theatre. He pulled back the high sliding doors to reveal the long glassy metallic snout of the Maxitron, then started to stack the lead screening shields against the rear wall.

A few minutes later the generator hummed into life.

The anemone stirred. Basking in the warm subliminal sea of radiation rising around it, prompted by countless pelagic memories, it reached tentatively across the tank, groping blindly towards the dim uterine sun. Its tendrils flexed, the thousands of dormant neural cells in their tips regrouping and multiplying, each harnessing the unlocked energies of its nucleus. Chains forged themselves, lattices tiered upwards into multi-faceted lenses, focused slowly on the vivid spectral outlines of the sounds dancing like phosphorescent waves around the darkened chamber of the dome.

Gradually an image formed, revealing an enormous black fountain that poured an endless stream of brilliant light over the circle of benches and tanks. Beside it a figure moved, adjusting the flow through its mouth. As it stepped across the floor its feet threw off vivid bursts of colour, its hands racing along the benches conjured up a dazzling chiaroscuro, balls of blue and violet light that exploded fleetingly in the darkness like miniature star-shells.

Photons murmured. Steadily, as it watched the glimmering screen of sounds around it, the anemone continued to expand. Its ganglia linked, heeding a new source of stimuli from the delicate diaphragms in the crown of its notochord. The silent outlines of the laboratory began to echo softly, waves of muted sound fell from the arc lights and echoed off the benches and furniture below. Etched in sound, their angular forms resonated with sharp persistent overtones. The plastic-ribbed chairs were a buzz of staccato discords, the square-sided desk a continuous double-featured tone.

Ignoring these sounds once they had been perceived, the anemone turned

to the ceiling, which reverberated like a shield in the sounds pouring steadily from the fluorescent tubes. Streaming through a narrow skylight, its voice clear and strong, interweaved by numberless overtones, the sun sang . . .

It was a few minutes before dawn when Powers left the laboratory and stepped into his car. Behind him the great dome lay silently in the darkness, the thin shadows of the white moonlit hills falling across its surface. Powers freewheeled the car down the long curving drive to the lake road below, listening to the tyres cutting across the blue gravel, then let out the clutch and accelerated the engine.

As he drove along, the limestone hills half hidden in the darkness on his left, he gradually became aware that, although no longer looking at the hills, he was still in some oblique way conscious of their forms and outlines in the back of his mind. The sensation was undefined but none the less certain, a strange almost visual impression that emanated most strongly from the deep clefts and ravines dividing one cliff face from the next. For a few minutes Powers let it play upon him, without trying to identify it, a dozen strange images moving across his brain.

The road swung up around a group of chalets built on to the lake shore, taking the car right under the lee of the hills, and Powers suddenly felt the massive weight of the escarpment rising up into the dark sky like a cliff of luminous chalk, and realized the identity of the impression now registering powerfully within his mind. Not only could he see the escarpment, but he was aware of its enormous age, felt distinctly the countless millions of years since it had first reared out of the magma of the earth's crust. The ragged crests three hundred feet above him, the dark gulleys and fissures, the smooth boulders by the roadside at the foot of the cliff, all carried a distinct image of themselves across to him, a thousand voices that together told of the total time that had elapsed in the life of the escarpment, a psychic picture defined and clear as the visual image brought to him by his eyes.

Involuntarily, Powers had slowed the car, and turning his eyes away from the hill face he felt a second wave of time sweep across the first. The image was broader but of shorter perspectives, radiating from the wide disc of the salt lake, breaking over the ancient limestone cliffs like shallow rollers dashing against a towering headland.

Closing his eyes, Powers lay back and steered the car along the interval between the two time fronts, feeling the images deepen and strengthen within his mind. The vast age of the landscape, the inaudible chorus of voices resonating from the lake and from the white hills, seemed to carry him back through time, down endless corridors to the first thresholds of the world.

He turned the car off the road along the track leading towards the target range. On either side of the culvert the cliff faces boomed and echoed with vast impenetrable time fields, like enormous opposed magnets. As he finally emerged between them on to the flat surface of the lake it seemed

to Powers that he could feel the separate identity of each sand-grain and salt crystal calling to him from the surrounding ring of hills.

He parked the car beside the mandala and walked slowly towards the outer concrete rim curving away into the shadows. Above him he could hear the stars, a million cosmic voices that crowded the sky from one horizon to the next, a true canopy of time. Like jostling radio beacons, their long aisles interlocking at countless angles, they plunged into the sky from the narrowest recesses of space. He saw the dim red disc of Sirius, heard its ancient voice, untold millions of years old, dwarfed by the huge spiral nebulae in Andromeda, a gigantic carousel of vanished universes, their voices almost as old as the cosmos itself. To Powers the sky seemed an endless babel, the time-song of a thousand galaxies overlaying each other in his mind. As he moved slowly towards the centre of the mandala he craned up at the glittering traverse of the Milky Way, searching the confusion of clamouring nebulae and constellations.

Stepping into the inner circle of the mandala, a few yards from the platform at its centre, he realized that the tumult was beginning to fade, and that a single stronger voice had emerged and was dominating the others. He climbed on to the platform, raised his eyes to the darkened sky, moving through the constellations to the island galaxies beyond them, hearing the thin archaic voices reaching to him across the millennia. In his pockets he felt the paper tapes, and turned to find the distant diadem of Canes Venatici, heard its great voice mounting in his mind.

Like an endless river, so broad that its banks were below the horizons, it flowed steadily towards him, a vast course of time that spread outwards to fill the sky and the universe, enveloping everything within them. Moving slowly, the forward direction of its majestic current almost imperceptible, Powers knew that its source was the source of the cosmos itself. As it passed him, he felt its massive magnetic pull, let himself be drawn into it, borne gently on its powerful back. Quietly it carried him away, and he rotated slowly, facing the direction of the tide. Around him the outlines of the hills and the lake had faded, but the image of the mandala, like a cosmic clock, remained fixed before his eyes, illuminating the broad surface of the stream. Watching it constantly, he felt his body gradually dissolving, its physical dimensions melting into the vast continuum of the current, which bore him out into the centre of the great channel, sweeping him onward, beyond hope but at last at rest, down the broadening reaches of the river of eternity.

As the shadows faded, retreating into the hill slopes, Kaldren stepped out of his car, walked hesitantly towards the concrete rim of the outer circle. Fifty yards away, at the centre, Coma knelt beside Powers' body, her small hands pressed to his dead face. A gust of wind stirred the sand, dislodging a strip of tape that drifted towards Kaldren's feet. He bent down and picked it up, then rolled it carefully in his hands and slipped it into his

pocket. The dawn air was cold, and he turned up the collar of his jacket, watching Coma impassively.

'It's six o'clock,' he told her after a few minutes. 'I'll go and get the police. You stay with him.' He paused and then added: 'Don't let them break the clock.'

Coma turned and looked at him. 'Aren't you coming back?'

'I don't know.' Nodding to her, Kaldren swung on his heel.

He reached the lake road, five minutes later parked the car in the drive outside Whitby's laboratory.

The dome was in darkness, all its windows shuttered, but the generator still hummed in the X-ray theatre. Kaldren stepped through the entrance and switched on the lights. In the theatre he touched the grilles of the generator, felt the warm cylinder of the beryllium end-window. The circular target table was revolving slowly, its setting at 1 r.p.m., a steel restraining chair shackled to it hastily. Grouped in a semicircle a few feet away were most of the tanks and cages, piled on top of each other haphazardly. In one of them an enormous squid-like plant had almost managed to climb from its vivarium. Its long translucent tendrils clung to the edges of the tank, but its body had burst into a jellified pool of globular mucilage. In another an enormous spider had trapped itself in its own web, hung helplessly in the centre of a huge three-dimensional maze of phosphorescing thread, twitching spasmodically.

All the experimental plants and animals had died. The chimp lay on its back among the remains of the hutch, the helmet forward over its eyes. Kaldren watched it for a moment, then sat down on the desk and picked up the phone.

While he dialled the number he noticed a film reel lying on the blotter. For a moment he stared at the label, then slid the reel into his pocket beside the tape.

After he had spoken to the police he turned off the lights and went out to the car, drove off slowly down the drive.

When he reached the summer house the early sunlight was breaking across the ribbon-like balconies and terraces. He took the lift to the penthouse, made his way through into the museum. One by one he opened the shutters and let the sunlight play over the exhibits. Then he pulled a chair over to a side window, sat back and stared up at the light pouring through into the room.

Two or three hours later he heard Coma outside, calling up to him. After half an hour she went away, but a little later a second voice appeared and shouted up at Kaldren. He left his chair and closed all the shutters overlooking the front courtyard, and eventually he was left undisturbed.

Kaldren returned to his seat and lay back quietly, his eyes gazing across the lines of exhibits. Half-asleep, periodically he leaned up and adjusted the flow of light through the shutter, thinking to himself, as he would do through the coming months, of Powers and his strange mandala, and of the seven and their journey to the white gardens of the moon, and the

blue people who had come from Orion and spoken in poetry to them of ancient beautiful worlds beneath golden suns in the island galaxies, vanished for ever now in the myriad deaths of the cosmos.

1960

THE LAST WORLD OF MR GODDARD

For no apparent reason, the thunder particularly irritated Mr Goddard. All day, as he moved about his duties as ground floor supervisor, he listened to it booming and rolling in the distance, almost lost amid the noise and traffic of the department store. Twice, on some pretext, he took the lift up to the roof-top cafeteria and carefully scanned the sky, searching the horizons for any sign of storm-cloud or turbulence. As usual, however, the sky was a bland, impassive blue, mottled by a few clumps of leisurely cumuli.

This was what worried Mr Goddard. Leaning on the cafeteria railing he could hear the thunder distinctly, cleaving the air only a thousand feet above his head, the huge claps lumbering past like the colliding wing streams of enormous birds. Intermittently the sounds would stop, to re-start a few minutes later.

Mr Goddard was not the only one to notice them – the people at the tables on the terrace were craning up at the sourceless din, as perplexed as himself. Normally Mr Goddard would have exchanged some pleasantry with them – his elderly grey-haired figure in its old-world herringbone suit had been a byword for kindly concern for over twenty years – but today he hurried past without even looking at them. Down on the ground floor he felt less uneasy, but throughout the afternoon, while he roved among the busy counters, patting the children on the head, he listened to the thunder sounding faintly in the distance, inexplicable and strangely threatening.

At six o'clock he took up his position in the time-keeper's booth, waited impatiently until the final time card had been stamped, then handed over to the night watchman, and the last of the staff had left for home. As he made his way out, pulling on his ancient overcoat and deerstalker, the clear evening air was still stirred by occasional rumblings.

Mr Goddard's house was less than half a mile away, a small two-storey villa surrounded by tall hedges. Superficially dilapidated though still sound, at first glance it was indistinguishable from any other bachelor residence, although anyone entering the short drive would have noticed one unusual feature – all the windows, both upstairs and down, were securely shuttered. Indeed, they had remained shuttered for so long that the ivy growing across the front of the house had matted itself through the wooden slats, here and there pulling apart the rotting wood.

Closer inspection at these points would have revealed, behind the dusty panes, the interlocking diagonals of steel grilles.

Collecting a bottle of milk off the doorstep, Mr Goddard let himself into the kitchen. This was furnished with an armchair and a small couch, and served him as his living room. He busied himself preparing an evening meal. Halfway through, a neighbouring cat, a regular visitor, scratched at the door and was allowed in. They sat at the table together, the cat on its customary cushion up on one of the chairs, watching Mr Goddard with its small, hard eyes.

Shortly before eight o'clock Mr Goddard began his invariable evening routine. Opening the kitchen door, he glanced up and down the side entrance, then locked it behind him, securing both windows and door with a heavy drop bar. He next entered the hall, ushering the cat before him, and began his inspection of the house.

This was done with great care, using the cat as his sixth sense. Mr Goddard watched it carefully, noting its reactions as it wandered softly through the deserted rooms, singing remotely to itself.

The house was completely empty. Upstairs the floorboards were bare, the windows without curtains, lamp bulbs shadeless. Dust gathered in the corners and stained the fraying Victorian wallpaper. All the fireplaces had been bricked up, and the bare stonework above the mantels showed that the chimneys had been solidly filled in.

Once or twice Mr Goddard tested the grilles, which effectively turned the room into a succession of steel cages. Satisfied, he made his way downstairs and went into the front room, noting that nothing was amiss. He steered the cat into the kitchen, poured it a bowl of milk as a reward and slipped back into the hallway, latching the door behind him.

One room he had still not entered – the real lounge. Taking a key from his pocket, Mr Goddard turned the lock and let himself through.

Like the other rooms, this was bare and unfurnished, except for a wooden chair and a large black safe that stood with its back to one wall. The other distinctive feature was a single light bulb of considerable power suspended on an intricate pulley system from the centre of the ceiling.

Buttoning his jacket, Mr Goddard went over to the safe. Massive and ancient, it was approximately three feet wide and deep. Once it had been painted a dark bottle green, but by now most of the paint had peeled, revealing a dull black steel. A huge door, the full width and depth of the safe, was recessed into its face.

Beside the safe was the chair, a celluloid visor slung over its back. Mr Goddard pulled this on, giving himself the look of a refined elderly counterfeiter about to settle down to a hard evening's work. From his key chain he selected a small silver key, and fitted it into the lock. Turning the handle full circle, he drew the caissons back into the door, then pulled steadily with both hands and swung it open.

The safe was without shelves, a single continuous vault. Occupying

the entire cavity, separated from the three-inch-thick walls by a narrow interval, was a large black tin document box.

Pausing to regain his breath, Mr Goddard heard a dull rumble of thunder sound through the darkness beyond the shuttered windows. Frowning involuntarily, he suddenly noticed a feathery thudding noise coming from inside the safe. He bent down and was just in time to see a large white moth emerge from the space above the document box, ricocheting erratically off the roof, at each impact sending a dull echo reverberating through the tin walls.

Mr Goddard smiled broadly to himself, as if divining something that had puzzled him all day. Leaning on the safe, he watched the moth circle the light, frantically shaking to pieces its damaged wings. Finally it plunged into one of the walls and fell stunned to the floor. Mr Goddard went over and swept it through the door with his foot, then returned to the safe. Reaching inside, with great care he lifted the document box out by the handles fastened to the centre of the lid.

The box was heavy. It required all Mr Goddard's efforts to steer it out without banging it against the safe, but with long practice he withdrew it in a single motion. He placed it gently on the floor, pulled up the chair and lowered the light until it was a few inches above his head. Releasing a catch below the lid, he tilted it back on its hinges.

Below him, brightly reflected in the light, was what appeared to be an elaborate doll's house. In fact, however, it was a whole complex of miniature buildings, perfectly constructed models with carefully detailed roof-tops and cornices, walls and brickwork so exactly duplicating the original that but for the penumbral figure of Mr Goddard looming out of the darkness they might have passed for real buildings and houses. The doors and windows were exquisitely worked, fitted with minute lattices and panes, each the size of a soap flake. The paving stones, the street furniture, the camber of the roadways, were perfect scale reductions.

The tallest building in the box was about fourteen inches high, containing six storeys. It stood at one corner of a crossroads that traversed the centre of the box, and was obviously a replica of the department store at which Mr Goddard worked. Its interior had been furnished and decorated with as much care as its external façade; through the windows could be seen the successive floors laid out with their miniature merchandise, rolls of carpet on the first, lingerie and women's fashions on the second, furniture on the third. The roof-top cafeteria had been equipped with small metal chairs and tables, set with plates, cutlery and bowls of tiny flowers.

On the corners to the left and right of the store were the bank and supermarket, with the town hall diagonally opposite. Again, these were perfect replicas of their originals: in the drawers behind the counters in the bank were bundles of minuscule banknotes, a glitter of coins like heaps of silver dust. The interior of the supermarket was an exercise in a thousand virtuosities. The stalls were stacked with

pyramids of tins and coloured packets almost too small for the eye to distinguish.

Beyond the buildings dominating the crossroads were the lesser shops and premises lining the side-streets – the drapers, a public house, shoeshops and tobacconists. Looking around, the entire town seemed to stretch away into the distance. The walls of the box had been painted so skilfully, with such clever control of perspective, that it was almost impossible to tell where the models ended and the walls intervened. The micro-cosmic world was so perfect in its own right, the illusion of reality so absolute that it appeared to be the town itself, its very dimensions those of reality.

Suddenly, through the warm early morning sunlight, a shadow moved. The glass door of one of the shoeshops opened, a figure stepped out for a moment onto the pavement, glanced up and down the still deserted street, then retreated into the dark recesses of the shop's interior. A middle-aged man in a grey suit and white collar, it was presumably the manager opening the shop in the morning. In agreement with this, a second doorway opened farther down the street; and this time a woman came out of a hairdresser's, and began to wind down the blind. She wore a black skirt and pink plastic smock. As she went back into the salon she waved to someone walking down the street towards the town hall.

More figures emerged from the doorways, strolled along the pavements talking to each other, starting the day's business. Soon the streets were full; the offices over the shops came to life, typists moving in among the desks and filing cabinets. Signs were put up or taken down; calendars moved on. The first customers arrived at the department store and supermarket, ambled past the fresh counter displays. At the town hall clerks sat at their ledgers, in their private offices behind the oak panelling the senior officials had their first cups of tea. Like a well-ordered hive, the town came to life.

High above it all, his gigantic face hidden in the shadows, Mr Goddard quietly watched his lilliputian scene like a discreet aged Gulliver. He sat forward, the green shade shielding his eyes, hands clasped lightly in his lap. Occasionally he would lean over a few inches to catch a closer glimpse of the figures below him, or tilt his head to see into one of the shops or offices. His face showed no emotion, he seemed content to be simply a spectator. Two feet away the hundreds of tiny figures moved about their lives, and a low murmur of street noises crept out into the room.

The tallest of the figures were no more than an inch and a half in height, yet their perfectly formed faces were completely furnished with character and expression. Most of them Mr Goddard knew by sight, many by name. He saw Mrs Hamilton, the lingerie buyer, late for work, hurrying down the alleyway to the staff entrance. Through a window he could see the managing director's office, where Mr Sellings was delivering his usual

weekly pep-talk to a trio of department heads. In the streets outside were scores of regular customers Mr Goddard had known intimately for years, buying their groceries, posting their letters, exchanging gossip.

As the scene below him unfolded, Mr Goddard gradually edged nearer the box, taking a particular interest in two or three of the score of separate tableaux. An interesting feature of his vantage point was that by some freak of architecture or perspective it afforded him a multiplicity of perfect angles by which to observe almost every one of the diminutive figures. The high windows of the bank provided him with a view of each of the clerks at their counters; a transom beyond exposed the strongroom, the rows of deposit boxes on their shelves behind the grille, one of the junior cashiers amusing himself by reading the labels. The department store, with its wide floors, he could cover merely by inclining his head. The smaller shops along the streets were just as exposed. Rarely more than two rooms deep, their rear windows and fanlights provided him all the access he needed. Nothing escaped Mr Goddard's scrutiny. In the back alleys he could see the stacked bicycles, the charwomen's mops in their buckets by the basement doors, the dustbins half-filled with refuse.

The first scene to attract Mr Goddard's attention was one involving the stockroom supervisor at the store, Mr Durrant. Casting his eye at random through the bank, Mr Goddard noticed him in the manager's office, leaning across the latter's desk and explaining something earnestly. Usually Durrant would have been a member of the group being harangued by Mr Sellings, and only urgent business could have taken him to the bank. The manager, however, appeared to be doing what he could to get rid of Durrant, avoiding his face and fiddling with some papers. Suddenly Durrant lost his temper. Tie askew, he began to shout angrily. The manager accepted this silently, shaking his head slowly with a bleak smile. Finally Durrant strode to the door, hesitated with a look of bitter reproach, and stalked out.

Leaving the bank, and apparently oblivious of his duties at the store, he walked briskly down the High Street. Stopping at the hairdresser's, he went in and made his way through to a private booth at the back where a large man in a check suit, still wearing a green trilby, was being shaved. Mr Goddard watched their conversation through a skylight above them. The man in the chair, the local bookmaker, lay back silently behind his lather until Durrant finished talking, then with a casual flip of one hand waved him to a seat.

Putting two and two together, Mr Goddard waited with interest for their conversation to be resumed. What he had just seen confirmed suspicions recently prompted by Durrant's distracted manner.

However, just as the bookmaker pulled off the towel and stood up, something more important caught Mr Goddard's eye.

* * *

Directly behind the department store was a small cul-de-sac sealed off from the alleyway leading in from the street by high wooden doors. It was piled with old packing cases and miscellaneous refuse, and its far side was formed by the rear wall of the box, a sheer cliff that rose straight up into the distant glare above. The glazed windows of a service lift shaft overlooked the yard, topped on the fifth floor by a small balcony.

It was this balcony that had attracted Mr Goddard's attention. Two men were crouched on it, manipulating a long wooden contraption that Mr Goddard identified as a telescopic ladder. Together they hoisted it into the air, and by pulling on a system of ropes extended it against the wall to a point about fifteen feet above their heads. Satisfied, they lashed the lower end securely to the balcony railings; then one of them mounted the ladder and climbed up to its topmost rung, arms outstretched across the wall, high over the yard below.

They were trying to escape from the box! Mr Goddard hunched forward, watching them with astonishment. The top of the ladder was still seven or eight inches from the overhanging rim of the box, thirty or forty feet away from the men on the balcony, but their industry was impressive. He watched them motionlessly while they tightened the guyropes.

Dimly, in the distance, midnight chimed. Mr Goddard looked at his watch, then without a further glance into the box pushed the lamp towards the ceiling and lowered the lid. He stood up and carried the box carefully to the safe, stowed it away, and sealed the door. Switching off the light, he let himself noiselessly out of the room.

The next day at the store Mr Goddard made his usual rounds, dispensing his invariable prescription of friendly chatter and *bonhomie* to sales assistants and customers alike, making full use of the countless trivial insights he had been provided with the previous evening. All the while he kept a constant lookout for Mr Durrant; reluctant to interfere, he was nevertheless afraid that without some drastic re-direction of the man's fortunes his entanglement with the bookmaker would soon end in tragedy.

No one in the stockrooms had seen Durrant all morning, but shortly after 12 o'clock Mr Goddard spotted him hurrying down the street past the main entrance. Durrant stopped, glanced around indecisively, then began to wander through the showcases as he pondered something.

Mr Goddard made his way out, and casually sidled up to Durrant.

'Fine day, isn't it?' he remarked. 'Everybody's starting to think about their holidays.'

Durrant nodded absently, examining a display of alpine equipment in the sports-goods window. 'Are they? Good.'

'You going away, Mr Durrant? South of France again, I suppose.'

'What? No, I don't think we will be this year.' Durrant began to move off, but Mr Goddard caught up with him.

'Sorry to hear that, Mr Durrant. I thought you deserved a good holiday abroad. Nothing the trouble, I hope.' He looked searchingly into Durrant's

face. 'If I can help at all, do let me know. I'd be glad to make you a small loan. An old man like me hasn't much use for it.'

Durrant stopped and peered thoughtfully at Mr Goddard. 'That's kind of you, Goddard,' he said at last. 'Very kind.'

Mr Goddard smiled deprecatingly. 'Don't give it a thought. I like to stand by the firm, you know. Forgive me mentioning it, but would fifty be any use to you?'

Durrant's eyes narrowed slightly. 'Yes, it would be a lot of use.' He paused, then asked quietly: 'Are you doing this off your own bat, or did Sellings put you up to it?'

'Put me up to it –?'

Durrant closed the interval between them, and in a harder voice rapped out: 'You must have been following me around for days. You know just about everything about everybody, don't you, Goddard? I've a damn good mind to report you.'

Mr Goddard backed away, wondering how to retrieve the situation. Just then he noticed that they were alone at the showcases. The groups of people who usually milled around the windows were pressing into the alleyway beside the store; there was a lot of shouting in the distance.

'What the hell's going on?' Durrant snapped. He joined the crowd in the alleyway and peered over the heads.

Mr Goddard hurried back into the store. All the assistants were craning over their shoulders and whispering to each other; some had left the counters and were gathering around the service doors at the rear.

Mr Goddard pushed his way through, someone was calling for the police and a woman from the personnel department came down in the freight lift carrying a pair of blankets.

The commissionaire holding the throng back let Mr Goddard past. In the yard outside was a group of fifteen or twenty people, all looking up at the fifth-floor balcony. Tied to the railings was the lower half of a home-made ladder, jutting up into the air at an angle of 45 degrees. The top section, a limb about twelve feet long, had been lashed to the upper end, but the joint had failed, and the section now hung down vertically, swinging slowly from side to side above the heads of the people in the yard.

With an effort Mr Goddard controlled his voice. Someone had covered the two bodies with the blankets, and a man kneeling beside them – presumably a doctor – was shaking his head slowly.

'What I can't understand,' one of the assistant managers was whispering to the commissionaire, 'is where they were trying to climb to. The ladder must have pointed straight up into the air.'

The commissionaire nodded. 'Mr Masterman and Mr Streatfield, too. What would they be building a ladder for, senior men like that?'

Mr Goddard followed the line of the ladder up towards the sky. The rear wall of the yard was only seven or eight feet high, beyond it lay the

galvanized iron roof of a bicycle shed and an open car park. The ladder had pointed nowhere, but the compulsion driving the two men had been blind and irresistible.

That evening Mr Goddard made the rounds of his house more perfunctorily than usual, glanced briefly into the empty rooms, closing the doors before the cat had a chance to do more than test the air. He shut it into the kitchen, then hurried off to unlock the safe.

Carrying the box out into the centre of the floor, he unlatched the lid.

As the town came to life below him he scrutinized it carefully, moving up and down the miniature streets, peering through all the windows in turn, fixing the identity and role of as many as possible of the tiny inhabitants. Like a thousand shuttles weaving an infinitely intricate pattern, they threaded through the shops and offices, in and out of countless doorways, every one of them touching a score of others somewhere among the pavements and arcades, adding another stitch to the tapestry of incident and motive ravelling their lives together. Mr Goddard traced each thread, trying to detect any shift in direction, and untoward interlocking of behaviour.

The pattern, he realized, was changing. As yet it was undefined, but slight variations were apparent, subtle shifts in the relationships between the people in the box: rival storekeepers seemed to be on intimate terms, strangers had begun to talk to each other, there was a great deal of unnecessary and purposeless activity.

Mr Goddard searched for a focus, an incident that would unmask the sources of the new pattern. He examined the balcony behind the lift shaft, watching for any further attempts to escape. The ladder had been removed but nothing had been done to replace it. Other potential escape routes – the roof of the cinema, the clock tower of the town hall – revealed no further clues.

One incident alone stood out, puzzling him even more. This was the unique spectacle, in a quiet alcove of the billiards saloon, of Mr Durrant introducing his bank manager to the bookmaker. The trio were still in earnest conversation when he closed the box reluctantly at two o'clock the next morning.

Over the following days Mr Goddard watched the crowds passing through the store, waiting to detect, as it were in the macrocosm, some of the tendencies he had observed in the box. His sixty-fifth birthday, soon due to fall, was a handy topic which provided ready conversational access to the senior members of the staff. Curiously, however, the friendly responses he expected were missing; the exchanges were brief, sometimes almost to the point of rudeness. This he put down to the changed atmosphere in the store since the deaths of the two ladder climbers. At the inquest there had been a confused hysterical outburst

by one of the saleswomen, and the coroner had cryptically remarked that it appeared that information was being deliberately withheld. A murmur of agreement had spontaneously swept the entire room, but what exactly he meant no one seemed to know.

Another symptom of this uneasiness was the rash of notices that were handed in. Almost a third of the staff were due to leave, most of them for reasons that were patently little more than excuses. When Mr Goddard probed for the real reasons he discovered that few people were aware of them. The motivation was purely unconscious.

As if to emphasize this intrusion of the irrational, one evening as Mr Goddard was leaving the store he saw the bank manager standing high above the street on the clock tower of the town hall, gazing up into the sky.

During the next week little occurred within the box to clarify the situation. The shifting and regrouping of relationships continued. He saw the bank manager more and more in the company of the bookmaker, and realized that he had been completely mistaken in assuming that Durrant was under pressure of his gambling debts – in fact, his role seemed to be that of intermediary between the bookmaker and bank manager, who had at last been persuaded to join them in their scheme.

That some sort of conspiracy was afoot he was sure. At first he assumed that a mass break-out from the box was being planned, but nothing confirmed this. Rather he felt that some obscure compulsion, as yet unidentified to itself, was generating within the minds of those in the box, reflected in the bizarre and unpredictable behaviour of their counterparts in the outside world. Unconscious of their own motives and only half aware of themselves, his fellow employees at the store had begun to resemble the pieces of some enormous puzzle, like disjointed images fixed in the fragments of a shattered mirror. In conclusion he decided on a policy of *laissez-faire*. A few more weeks would certainly reveal the sources of the conspiracy.

Unfortunately, sooner than Mr Goddard anticipated, events moved forward rapidly to a spectacular crisis.

The day of his sixty-fifth birthday, he made his way to the store half an hour later than usual, and on arrival was told that Mr Sellings wished to see him.

Sellings first offered his congratulations, then launched into a recapitulation of Mr Goddard's years of service to the store, and concluded by wishing him as many years again of contented retirement.

It took Mr Goddard several moments to grasp the real significance of this. Nothing had ever been said to him about his retirement, and he had always assumed that he would stay on until, like many members of the staff, he was well into his seventies.

Collecting himself, he said as much to Sellings. 'I haven't exactly been

expecting retirement, Mr Sellings. I think there must have been some mistake.'

Sellings stood up, shaking his head with a quick smile. 'No mistake at all, Mr Goddard, I assure you. As a matter of fact the board carefully considered your case yesterday, and we agreed that you well deserve an uninterrupted rest after all these years.'

Mr Goddard frowned. 'But I don't wish to retire, sir. I've made no plans.'

'Well, now's the time to start.' Sellings was on his way to the door, handshake ready. 'Comfortable pension, little house of your own, the world's your oyster.'

Mr Goddard sat tight, thinking quickly. 'Mr Sellings, I'm afraid I can't accept the board's decision. I'm sure, for the sake of the business, I should stay on in my present post.' The smile had gone from Sellings' face; he looked impatient and irritable. 'If you were to ask the floor managers and assistants, not to speak of the customers, they would all insist that I stay on. They would be very shocked at the suggestion of retirement.'

'Would they?' Sellings asked curtly. 'My information is to the contrary. Believe me, your retirement has come at a very lucky time for you, Mr Goddard. I've had a great number of complaints recently that otherwise I should have been obliged to act upon. Promptly and drastically.'

As he left the accounts department for the last time Mr Goddard numbly repeated these words to himself. He found them almost impossible to believe. And yet Sellings was a responsible man who would never take a single opinion on such an important matter. Somehow, though, he was colossally in error.

Or was he? As he made his farewell rounds, half-hoping that the news of his sudden retirement would rally support to him, Mr Goddard realized that Sellings was right. Floor by floor, department by department, counter by counter, he recognized the same inner expression, the same attitude of tacit approval. *They were all glad he was going.* Not one of them showed real regret; a good number slipped away before he could shake hands with them, others merely grunted briefly. Several of the older hands, who had known Mr Goddard for twenty or thirty years, seemed slightly embarrassed, but none of them offered a word of sympathy.

Finally, when one group in the furniture department deliberately turned their backs to avoid speaking to him, Mr Goddard cut short his tour. Stunned and humiliated, he collected his few possessions from his locker and made his way out.

It seemed to take him all day to reach his house. Head down, he walked slowly along the quiet side-streets, oblivious of the passers-by, pathetically trying to absorb this blow to all he had assumed about himself for so many years. His interest in other people was sincere and unaffected, he knew without doubt. Countless times he had gone out of his way to be of help to others, had put endless thought into arriving at the best solutions to

their problems. But with what result? He had aroused only contempt, envy and distrust.

On his doorstep the cat waited patiently. Surprised to see him so early it ran forward, purring and rubbing itself against his legs as he latched the gate. But Mr Goddard failed to notice it. Fumbling, he unlocked the kitchen door, closed it automatically behind him. Taking off his coat, he made himself some tea, and without thinking poured a saucer of milk for the cat. He watched it drink, still trying helplessly to understand the antagonism he had aroused in so many people.

Suddenly he pushed his tea away and went to the door. Without bothering to go upstairs he made his way straight into the lounge. Switching on the light, he stared heavily at the safe. Somewhere here, he knew, was the reason for his dismissal that morning. If only his eyes were sharp enough, he would discover it.

Unlocking the safe, he unclasped the door and pulled it back abruptly, wrenching himself slightly against its great inertia. Impatient to open the box he ignored the twinge in his shoulder, reached down and seized the butterfly handles.

As he swung the box out of the safe he realized that its weight was, momentarily, too much for him. Trying to brace himself, he edged one knee under the box and leaned his elbows on the lid, his shoulder against the safe.

The position was awkward, and he could only support it for a few seconds. Heaving again at the box, in an effort to replace it in the safe, he suddenly began to feel dizzy. A small spiral revolved before his eyes, gradually thickening into a deep black whirlpool that filled his head.

Before he could restrain it, the box tore itself from his hands and plunged to the floor with a violent metallic clatter.

Kneeling beside the safe, Mr Goddard slumped back limply against the wall, head lolling onto his chest.

The box lay on its side, just within the circle of light. The impact had forced the catches on the lid, and this was now open; a single narrow beam reflected off the under-surface into the interior of the box.

For a few minutes the room was quiet, except for the laboured uneven sounds of Mr Goddard's breathing. Then, almost imperceptibly, something moved in the interval between the lid and the floor. A small figure stepped tentatively out of the shadow, peered around itself in the full glare of the light, and disappeared again. Ten seconds later three more figures emerged, followed by others. In small groups they spread out across the floor, their tiny legs and arms rippling in the light. Behind them a score more appeared, pressing out in a solid stream, pushing past each other to escape from the box. Soon the circle of light was alive with swarms of the tiny figures, flickering like minnows in a floodlit pool.

In the darkness by the corner, the door creaked sharply. Together, the hundreds of figures froze. Eyes glinting suspiciously, the head of Mr

Goddard's cat swung round into the room. For a moment it paused, assessing the scene before it.

A sharp cry hissed through its teeth. With vicious speed, it bounded forward.

It was several hours later that Mr Goddard pulled himself slowly to his feet. Leaning weakly against the safe, he looked down at the upended safe beneath the bright cone of light. Carefully collecting himself, he rubbed his cheekbones and painfully massaged his chest and shoulders. Then he limped across to the box and steered it back onto its base. Gingerly, he lifted the lid and peered inside.

Abruptly he dropped the lid, glanced around the floor, swinging the light so that it swept the far corners. Then he turned and hurried out into the hall, switched on the light and examined the floor carefully, along the skirting boards and behind the grilles.

Over his shoulder he noticed that the kitchen door was open. He crossed to it and stepped in on tiptoe, eyes ranging between the table and chair legs, behind the broom and coal bucket.

'Sinbad!' Mr Goddard shouted.

Startled, the cat dropped the tiny object between its paws and backed away below the couch.

Mr Goddard bent down. He stared hard at the object for a few seconds, then stood up and leaned against the cupboard, his eyes closing involuntarily.

The cat pounced, its teeth flickering at its paws. It gulped noisily.

'Sinbad,' Mr Goddard said in a quieter voice. He gazed listlessly at the cat, finally stepped over to the door.

'Come outside,' he called to it.

The cat followed him, its tail whipping slowly from side to side. They walked down the pathway to the gate. Mr Goddard looked at his watch. It was 2.45, early afternoon. The houses around him were silent, the sky a distant, pacific blue. Here and there sunlight was reflected off one of the upstairs bay windows, but the street was motionless, its stillness absolute and unbroken.

Mr Goddard gestured the cat onto the pavement and closed the gate behind it.

Together they walked out into an empty world.

1960

STUDIO 5, THE STARS

Every evening during the summer at Vermilion Sands the insane poems of my beautiful neighbour drifted across the desert to me from Studio 5, The Stars, the broken skeins of coloured tape unravelling in the sand like the threads of a dismembered web. All night they would flutter around the buttresses below the terrace, entwining themselves through the balcony railings, and by morning, before I swept them away, they would hang across the south face of the villa like a vivid cerise bougainvillaea.

Once, after I had been to Red Beach for three days, I returned to find the entire terrace filled by an enormous cloud of coloured tissues, which burst through the french windows as I opened them and pushed into the lounge, spreading across the furniture and bookcases like the delicate tendrils of some vast and gentle plant. For days afterwards I found fragments of the poems everywhere.

I complained several times, walking the three hundred yards across the dunes to deliver a letter of protest, but no one ever answered the bell. I had only once seen my neighbour, on the day she arrived, driving down the Stars in a huge El Dorado convertible, her long hair swept behind her like the head-dress of a goddess. She had vanished in a glimmer of speed, leaving me with a fleeting image of sudden eyes in an ice-white face.

Why she refused to answer her bell I could never understand, but I noticed that each time I walked across to Studio 5 the sky was full of sand-rays, wheeling and screeching like anguished bats. On the last occasion, as I stood by her black glass front door, deliberately pressing the bell into its socket, a giant sand-ray had fallen out of the sky at my feet.

But this, as I realized later, was the crazy season at Vermilion Sands, when Tony Sapphire heard a sand-ray singing, and I saw the god Pan drive by in a Cadillac.

Who was Aurora Day, I often ask myself now. Sweeping across the placid out-of-season sky like a summer comet, she seems to have appeared in a different role to each of us at the colony along the Stars. To me, at first, she was a beautiful neurotic disguised as a *femme fatale*, but Raymond Mayo saw her as one of Salvador Dali's exploding madonnas, an enigma serenely riding out the apocalypse. To Tony Sapphire and the rest of her followers along the beach she was a reincarnation of Astarte herself, a diamond-eyed time-child thirty centuries old.

I can remember clearly how I found the first of her poems. After dinner one evening I was resting on the terrace – something I did most of the time at Vermilion Sands – when I noticed a streamer lying on the sand below the railing. A few yards away were several others, and for half an hour I watched them being blown lightly across the dunes. A car's headlamps shone in the drive at Studio 5, and I assumed that a new tenant had moved into the villa, which had stood empty for several months.

Finally, out of curiosity, I straddled the rail, jumped down on to the sand and picked up one of the ribbons of pink tissue. It was a fragment about three feet long, the texture of rose petal, so light that it began to flake and dissolve in my fingers.

Holding it up I read: . . . COMPARE THEE TO A SUMMER'S DAY, THOU ART MORE LOVELY . . .

I let it flutter away into the darkness below the balcony, then bent down and carefully picked up another, disentangling it from one of the buttresses.

Printed along it in the same ornate neo-classical type was: . . . SET KEEL TO BREAKERS, FORTH ON THAT GODLY SEA . . .

I looked over my shoulder. The light over the desert had gone now, and three hundred yards away my neighbour's villa was lit like a spectral crown. The exposed quartz veins in the sand reefs along the Stars rippled like necklaces in the sweeping headlights of the cars driving into Red Beach.

I glanced at the tape again.

Shakespeare and Ezra Pound? My neighbour had the most curious tastes. My interest fading, I returned to the terrace.

Over the next few days the streamers continued to blow across the dunes, for some reason always starting in the evening, when the lights of the traffic illuminated the lengths of coloured gauze. But to begin with I hardly noticed them – I was then editing *Wave IX*, an avant-garde poetry review, and the studio was full of auto-tapes and old galley proofs. Nor was I particularly surprised to find I had a poetess for my neighbour. Almost all the studios along the Stars are occupied by painters and poets – the majority abstract and non-productive. Most of us were suffering from various degrees of beach fatigue, that chronic malaise which exiles the victim to a limbo of endless sunbathing, dark glasses and afternoon terraces.

Later, however, the streamers drifting across the sand became rather more of a nuisance. When the protest notes achieved nothing I went over to my neighbour's villa with a view to seeing her in person. On this last occasion, after a dying ray had plummeted out of the sky and nearly stung me in its final spasm, I realized that there was little chance of reaching her.

A hunchbacked chauffeur with a club foot and a twisted face like a senile faun's was cleaning the cerise Cadillac in the drive. I went over to

him and pointed to the strands of tissue trailing through the first-floor windows and falling on to the desert below.

'These tapes are blowing all over my villa,' I told him. 'Your mistress must have one of her VT sets on open sequence.'

He eyed me across the broad hood of the El Dorado, sat down in the driving seat and took a small flute from the dashboard.

As I walked round to him he began to play some high, irritating chords. I waited until he had finished and asked in a louder voice: 'Do you mind telling her to close the windows?'

He ignored me, his lips pressed moodily to the flute. I bent down and was about to shout into his ear when a gust of wind swirled across one of the dunes just beyond the drive, in an instant whirled over the gravel, flinging up a miniature tornado of dust and ash. This miniature tornado completely enclosed us, blinding my eyes and filling my mouth with grit. Arms shielding my face, I moved away towards the drive, the long streamers whipping around me.

As suddenly as it had started, the squall vanished. The dust stilled and faded, leaving the air as motionless as it had been a few moments previously. I saw that I had backed about thirty yards down the drive, and to my astonishment realized that the Cadillac and chauffeur had disappeared, although the garage door was still open.

My head rang strangely, and I felt irritable and short of breath. I was about to approach the house again, annoyed at having been refused entry and left to suffer the full filthy impact of the dust squall, when I heard the thin piping refrain sound again into the air.

Low, but clear and strangely menacing, it sang in my ears, the planes of sound shifting about me in the air. Looking around for its source, I noticed the dust flicking across the surface of the dunes on either side of the drive.

Without waiting, I turned on my heel and hurried back to my villa.

Angry with myself for having been made such a fool of, and resolved to press some formal complaint, I first went around the terrace, picking up all the strands of tissue and stuffing them into the disposal chute. I climbed below the villa and cut away the tangled masses of streamers.

Cursorily, I read a few of the tapes at random. All printed the same erratic fragments, intact phrases from Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Keats and Eliot. My neighbour's VT set appeared to have a drastic memory fault, and instead of producing a variant on the classical model the selector head was simply regurgitating a dismembered version of the model itself. For a moment I thought seriously of telephoning the IBM agency in Red Beach and asking them to send a repair man round.

That evening, however, I finally spoke to my neighbour in person.

I had gone to sleep at about eleven, and an hour or so later something

woke me. A bright moon was at apogee, moving behind strands of pale green cloud that cast a thin light over the desert and the Stars. I stepped out on to the veranda and immediately noticed a curiously luminescent glow moving between the dunes. Like the strange music I had heard from the chauffeur's flute, the glow appeared to be sourceless, but I assumed it was cast by the moon shining through a narrow interval between the clouds.

Then I saw her, appearing for a moment among the dunes, strolling across the midnight sand. She wore a long white gown that billowed out behind her, against which her blue hair drifted loosely in the wind like the tail-fan of a paradise bird. Streamers floated about her feet, and overhead two or three purple rays circled endlessly. She walked on, apparently unaware of them, a single light behind her shining through an upstairs window of her villa.

Belting my dressing gown, I leaned against a pillar and watched her quietly, for the moment forgiving her the streamers and her ill-trained chauffeur. Occasionally she disappeared behind one of the green-shadowed dunes, her head raised slightly, moving from the boulevard towards the sand reefs on the edge of the fossil lake.

She was about a hundred yards from the nearest sand reef, a long inverted gallery of winding groynes and over-hanging grottoes, when something about her straight path and regular unvarying pace made me wonder whether she might in fact be sleepwalking.

I hesitated briefly, watching the rays circling around her head, then jumped over the rail and ran across the sand towards her.

The quartz flints stung at my bare feet, but I managed to reach her just as she neared the edge of the reef. I broke into a walk beside her and touched her elbow.

Three feet above my head the rays spat and whirled in the darkness. The strange luminosity that I had assumed came from the moon seemed rather to emanate from her white gown.

My neighbour was not somnambulating, as I thought, but lost in some deep reverie or dream. Her black eyes stared opaquely in front of her, her slim white-skinned face like a marble mask, motionless and without expression. She looked round at me sightlessly, one hand gesturing me away. Suddenly she stopped and glanced down at her feet, abruptly becoming aware of herself and her midnight walk. Her eyes cleared and she saw the mouth of the sand reef. She stepped back involuntarily, the light radiating from her gown increasing with her alarm.

Overhead the rays soared upwards into the air, their arcs wider now that she was awake.

'Sorry to startle you,' I apologized. 'But you were getting too close to the reef.'

She pulled away from me, her long black eyebrows arching.

'What?' she said uncertainly. 'Who are you?' To herself, as if completing her dream, she murmured *sotto voce*: 'Oh God, Paris, choose me, not

Minerva –' She broke off and stared at me wildly, her carmine lips fretting. She strode off across the sand, the rays swinging like pendulums through the dim air above her, taking with her the pool of amber light.

I waited until she reached her villa and turned away. Glancing at the ground, I noticed something glitter in the small depression formed by one of her footprints. I bent down, picked up a small jewel, a perfectly cut diamond of a single carat, then saw another in the next footprint. Hurrying forwards, I picked up half-a-dozen of the jewels, and was about to call out after her disappearing figure when I felt something wet in my hand.

Where I had held the jewels in the hollow of my palm now swam a pool of ice-cold dew.

I found out who she was the next day.

After breakfast I was in the bar when I saw the El Dorado turn into the drive. The club-footed chauffeur jumped from the car and hobbled over in his curious swinging gait to the front door. In his black-gloved hand he carried a pink envelope. I let him wait a few minutes, then opened the letter on the step as he went back to the car and sat waiting for me, his engine running.

> *I'm sorry to have been so rude last night. You stepped right into my dream and startled me. Could I make amends by offering you a cocktail? My chauffeur will collect you at noon.*
>
> AURORA DAY

I looked at my watch. It was 11:55. The five minutes, presumably, gave me time to compose myself.

The chauffeur was studying his driving wheel, apparently indifferent to my reaction. Leaving the door open, I stepped inside and put on my beach-jacket. On the way out I slipped a proof copy of *Wave IX* into one of the pockets.

The chauffeur barely waited for me to climb in before moving the big car rapidly down the drive.

'How long are you staying in Vermilion Sands?' I asked, addressing the band of curly russet hair between the peaked cap and black collar.

He said nothing. As we drove along the Stars he suddenly cut out into the oncoming lane and gunned the Cadillac forward in a tremendous burst of speed to overtake a car ahead.

Settling myself, I put the question again and waited for him to reply, then smartly tapped his black serge shoulder.

'Are you deaf, or just rude?'

For a second he took his eyes off the road and glanced back at me. I had a momentary impression of bright red pupils, ribald eyes that regarded me with a mixture of contempt and unconcealed savagery. Out of the side of his mouth came a sudden cackling stream of violent imprecations, a short filthy blast that sent me back into my seat.

* * *

He jumped out when we reached Studio 5 and opened the door for me, beckoning me up the black marble steps like an attendant spider ushering a very small fly into a particularly large web.

Once inside the doorway he seemed to disappear. I walked through the softly lit hall towards an interior pool where a fountain played and white carp circled tirelessly. Beyond it, in the lounge, I could see my neighbour reclining on a chaise longue, her white gown spread around her like a fan, the jewels embroidered into it glittering in the fountain light.

As I sat down she regarded me curiously, putting away a slender volume bound in yellow calf which appeared to be a private edition of poems. Scattered across the floor beside her was a miscellaneous array of other volumes, many of which I could identify as recently printed collections and anthologies.

I noticed a few coloured streamers trailing through the curtains by the window, and glanced around to see where she kept her VT set, helping myself to a cocktail off the low table between us.

'Do you read a lot of poetry?' I asked, indicating the volumes around her.

She nodded. 'As much as I can bear to.'

I laughed. 'I know what you mean. I have to read rather more than I want.' I took a copy of *Wave IX* from my pocket and passed it to her. 'Have you come across this one?'

She glanced at the title page, her manner moody and autocratic. I wondered why she had bothered to ask me over. 'Yes, I have. Appalling, isn't it? "Paul Ransom",' she noted. 'Is that you? You're the editor? How interesting.'

She said it with a peculiar inflection, apparently considering some possible course of action. For a moment she watched me reflectively. Her personality seemed totally dissociated, her awareness of me varying abruptly from one level to another, like light-changes in a bad motion picture. However, although her mask-like face remained motionless, I none the less detected a quickening of interest.

'Well, tell me about your work. You must know so much about what is wrong with modern poetry. Why is it all so bad?'

I shrugged. 'I suppose it's principally a matter of inspiration. I used to write a fair amount myself years ago, but the impulse faded as soon as I could afford a VT set. In the old days a poet had to sacrifice himself in order to master his medium. Now that technical mastery is simply a question of pushing a button, selecting metre, rhyme, assonance on a dial, there's no need for sacrifice, no ideal to invent to make the sacrifice worthwhile –'

I broke off. She was watching me in a remarkably alert way, almost as if she were going to swallow me.

Changing the tempo, I said: 'I've read quite a lot of your poetry, too.

Forgive me mentioning it, but I think there's something wrong with your Verse-Transcriber.'

Her face snapped and she looked away from me irritably. 'I haven't got one of those dreadful machines. Heavens above, you don't think *I* would use one?'

'Then where do the tapes come from?' I asked. 'The streamers that drift across every evening. They're covered with fragments of verse.'

Off-handedly, she said: 'Are they? Oh, I didn't know.' She looked down at the volumes scattered about on the floor. 'Although I should be the last person to write verse, I have been forced to recently. Through sheer necessity, you see, to preserve a dying art.'

She had baffled me completely. As far as I could remember, most of the poems on the tapes had already been written.

She glanced up and gave me a vivid smile.

'I'll send you some.'

The first ones arrived the next morning. They were delivered by the chauffeur in the pink Cadillac, neatly printed on quarto vellum and sealed by a floral ribbon. Most of the poems submitted to me come through the post on computer punch-tape, rolled up like automat tickets, and it was certainly a pleasure to receive such elegant manuscripts.

The poems, however, were impossibly bad. There were six in all, two Petrarchan sonnets, an ode and three free-form longer pieces. All were written in the same hectoring tone, at once minatory and obscure, like the oracular deliriums of an insane witch. Their overall import was strangely disturbing, not so much for the content of the poems as for the deranged mind behind them. Aurora Day was obviously living in a private world which she took very seriously indeed. I decided that she was a wealthy neurotic able to over-indulge her private fantasies.

I flipped through the sheets, smelling the musk-like scent that misted up from them. Where had she unearthed this curious style, these archaic mannerisms, the 'arise, earthly seers, and to thy ancient courses pen now thy truest vows'? Mixed up in some of the metaphors were odd echoes of Milton and Virgil. In fact, the whole tone reminded me of the archpriestess in the Aeneid who lets off blistering tirades whenever Aeneas sits down for a moment to relax.

I was still wondering what exactly to do with the poems – promptly on nine the next morning the chauffeur had delivered a second batch – when Tony Sapphire called to help me with the make-up of the next issue. Most of the time he spent at his beach-chalet at Lagoon West, programming an automatic novel, but he put in a day or two each week on *Wave IX*.

I was checking the internal rhyme chains in an IBM sonnet sequence of Xero Paris's as he arrived. While I held the code chart over the sonnets, checking the rhyme lattices, he picked up the sheets of pink quarto on which Aurora's poems were printed.

'Delicious scent,' he commented, fanning the sheets through the air. 'One way to get round an editor.' He started to read the first of the poems, then frowned and put it down.

'Extraordinary. What are they?'

'I'm not altogether sure,' I admitted. 'Echoes in a stone garden.'

Tony read the signature at the bottom of the sheets. '"Aurora Day." A new subscriber, I suppose. She probably thinks *Wave IX* is the *VT Times*. But what is all this – "nor psalms, nor canticles, nor hollow register to praise the queen of night –"?' He shook his head. 'What are they supposed to be?'

I smiled at him. Like most other writers and poets, he had spent so long sitting in front of his VT set that he had forgotten the period when poetry was actually handspun.

'They're poems, of a sort, obviously.'

'Do you mean she wrote these herself?'

I nodded. 'It has been done that way. In fact the method enjoyed quite a vogue for twenty or thirty centuries. Shakespeare tried it, Milton, Keats and Shelley – it worked reasonably well then.'

'But not now,' Tony said. 'Not since the VT set. How can you compete with an IBM heavy-duty logomatic analogue? Look at this one, for heaven's sake. It sounds like T.S. Eliot. She can't be serious.'

'You may be right. Perhaps the girl's pulling my leg.'

'Girl. She's probably sixty and tipples her eau de cologne. Sad. In some insane way they may mean something.'

'Hold on,' I told him. I was pasting down one of the Xero's satirical pastiches of Rupert Brooke and was six lines short. I handed Tony the master tape and he played it into the IBM, set the metre, rhyme scheme, verbal pairs, and then switched on, waited for the tape to chunter out of the delivery head, tore off six lines and passed them back to me. I didn't even need to read them.

For the next two hours we worked hard. At dusk we had completed over one thousand lines and broke off for a well-earned drink. We moved on to the terrace and sat, in the cool evening light, watching the colours melting across the desert, listening to the sand-rays cry in the darkness by Aurora's villa.

'What are all these streamers lying around under here?' Tony asked. He pulled one towards him, caught the strands as they broke in his hand and steered them on to the glass-topped table.

'"– nor canticles, nor hollow register –"' He read the line out, then released the tissue and let it blow away on the wind.

He peered across the shadow-covered dunes at Studio 5. As usual a single light was burning in one of the upper rooms, illuminating the threads unravelling in the sand as they moved towards us.

Tony nodded. 'So that's where she lives.' He picked up another of the

streamers that had coiled itself through the railing and was fluttering instantly at his elbow.

'You know, old sport, you're quite literally under siege.'

I was. During the next days a ceaseless bombardment of ever more obscure and bizarre poems reached me, always in two instalments, the first brought by the chauffeur promptly at nine o'clock each morning, the second that evening when the streamers began to blow across the dusk to me. The fragments of Shakespeare and Pound had gone now, and the streamers carried fragmented versions of the poems delivered earlier in the day, almost as if they represented her working drafts. Examining the tapes carefully I realized that, as Aurora Day had said, they were not produced by a VT set. The strands were too delicate to have passed through the spools and high-speed cams of a computer mechanism, and the lettering along them had not been printed but embossed by some process I was unable to identify.

Each day I read the latest offerings, carefully filed them away in the centre drawer of my desk. Finally, when I had a week's production stacked together, I placed them in a return envelope, addressed it 'Aurora Day, Studio 5, The Stars, Vermilion Sands', and penned a tactful rejection note, suggesting that she would feel ultimately more satisfied if her work appeared in another of the wide range of poetry reviews.

That night I had the first of what was to be a series of highly unpleasant dreams.

Making myself some strong coffee the next morning, I waited blearily for my mind to clear. I went on to the terrace, wondering what had prompted the savage nightmare that had plagued me through the night. The dream had been the first of any kind I had had for several years – one of the pleasant features of beach fatigue is a heavy dreamless sleep, and the sudden irruption of a dream-filled night made me wonder whether Aurora Day, and more particularly her insane poems, were beginning to prey on my mind more than I realized.

My headache took a long time to dissipate. I lay back, watching the Day villa, its windows closed and shuttered, awnings retracted, like a sealed crown. Who was she anyway, I asked myself, and what did she really want?

Five minutes later, I saw the Cadillac swing out of the drive and coast down the Stars towards me.

Not another delivery! The woman was tireless. I waited by the front door, met the driver halfway down the steps and took from him a wax-sealed envelope.

'Look,' I said to him confidentially. 'I'd hate to discourage an emerging talent, but I think you might well use any influence you have on your mistress and, you know, generally . . .' I let the idea hang in front of him,

and added: 'By the way, all these streamers that keep blowing across here are getting to be a damn nuisance.'

The chauffeur regarded me out of his red-rimmed foxy eyes, his beaked face contorted in a monstrous grin. Shaking his head sadly, he hobbled back to the car.

As he drove off I opened the letter. Inside was a single sheet of paper.

Mr Ransom,
Your rejection of my poems astounds me. I seriously advise you to reconsider your decision. This is no trifling matter. I expect to see the poems printed in your next issue.

AURORA DAY

That night I had another insane dream.

The next selection of poems arrived when I was still in bed, trying to massage a little sanity back into my mind. I climbed out of bed and made myself a large Martini, ignoring the envelope jutting through the door like the blade of a paper spear.

When I had steadied myself I slit it open, and scanned the three short poems included.

They were dreadful. Dimly I wondered how to persuade Aurora that the requisite talent was missing. Holding the Martini in one hand and peering at the poems in the other, I ambled on to the terrace and slumped down in one of the chairs.

With a shout I sprang into the air, knocking the glass out of my hand. I had sat down on something large and spongy, the size of a cushion but with uneven bony contours.

Looking down, I saw an enormous dead sand-ray lying in the centre of the seat, its white-tipped sting, still viable, projecting a full inch from its sheath above the cranial crest.

Jaw clamped angrily, I went straight into my study, slapped the three poems into an envelope with a rejection slip and scrawled across it: 'Sorry, entirely unsuitable. Please try other publications.'

Half an hour later I drove down to Vermilion Sands and mailed it myself. As I came back I felt quietly pleased with myself.

That afternoon a colossal boil developed on my right cheek.

Tony Sapphire and Raymond Mayo came round the next morning to commiserate. Both thought I was being pigheaded and pedantic.

'Print one,' Tony told me, sitting down on the foot of the bed.

'I'm damned if I will,' I said. I stared out across the desert at Studio 5. Occasionally a window moved and caught the sunlight but otherwise I had seen nothing of my neighbour.

Tony shrugged. 'All you've got to do is accept one and she'll be satisfied.'

'Are you sure?' I asked cynically. 'This may be only the beginning. For all we know she may have a dozen epics in the bottom of her suitcase.'

Raymond Mayo wandered over to the window beside me, slipped on his dark glasses and scrutinized the villa. I noticed that he looked even more dapper than usual, dark hair smoothed back, profile adjusted for maximum impact.

'I saw her at the "psycho i" last night,' he mused. 'She had a private balcony upon the mezzanine. Quite extraordinary. They had to stop the floor show twice.' He nodded to himself. 'There's something formless and unstated there, reminded me of Dali's "Cosmogonic Venus". Made me realize how absolutely terrifying all women really are. If I were you I'd do whatever I was told.'

I set my jaw, as far as I could, and shook my head dogmatically. 'Go away. You writers are always pouring scorn on editors, but when things get tough who's the first to break? This is the sort of situation I'm prepared to handle, my whole training and discipline tell me instinctively what to do. That crazy neurotic over there is trying to bewitch me. She thinks she can call down a plague of dead rays, boils and nightmares and I'll surrender my conscience.'

Shaking their heads sadly over my obduracy, Tony and Raymond left me to myself.

Two hours later the boil had subsided as mysteriously as it had appeared. I was beginning to wonder why when a pick-up from The Graphis Press in Vermilion Sands delivered the advance five-hundred of the next issue of *Wave IX*.

I carried the cartons into the lounge, then slit off the wrapping, thinking pleasurably of Aurora Day's promise that she would have her poems published in the next issue. She had failed to realize that I had passed the final pages two days beforehand, and that I could hardly have printed her poems even if I had wanted to.

Opening the pages, I turned to the editorial, another in my series of examinations of the present malaise affecting poetry.

However, in place of the usual half-dozen paragraphs of 10-point type I was astounded to see a single line of 24-point, announcing in italic caps:

A CALL TO GREATNESS!

I broke off, hurriedly peered at the cover to make sure Graphis had sent me advance copies of the right journal, then raced rapidly through the pages.

The first poem I recognized immediately. I had rejected it only two days earlier. The next three I had also seen and rejected, then came a series that were new to me, all signed 'Aurora Day' and taking the place of the poems I had passed in page proof.

The entire issue had been pirated! Not a single one of the original

poems remained, and a completely new make-up had been substituted. I ran back into the lounge and opened a dozen copies. They were all the same.

Ten minutes later I had carried the three cartons out to the incinerator, tipped them in and soaked the copies with petrol, then tossed a match into the centre of the pyre. Simultaneously, a few miles away Graphis Press were doing the same to the remainder of the 5,000 imprint. How the misprinting had occurred they could not explain. They searched out the copy, all on Aurora's typed notepaper, but with editorial markings in my handwriting! My own copy had disappeared, and they soon denied they had ever received it.

As the heavy flames beat into the hot sunlight I thought that through the thick brown smoke I could see a sudden burst of activity coming from my neighbour's house. Windows were opening under the awnings, and the hunchbacked figure of the chauffeur was scurrying along the terrace.

Standing on the roof, her white gown billowing around her like an enormous silver fleece, Aurora Day looked down at me.

Whether it was the large quantity of Martini I had drunk that morning, the recent boil on my cheek or the fumes from the burning petrol, I'm not sure, but as I walked back into the house I felt unsteady, and sat down hazily on the top step, closing my eyes as my brain swam.

After a few seconds my head cleared again. Leaning on my knees, I focused my eyes on the blue glass step between my feet. Cut into the surface in neat letters was:

Why so pale and wan, fond lover?
Prithee, why so pale?

Still too weak to more than register an automatic protest against this act of vandalism, I pulled myself to my feet, taking the door key out of my dressing-gown pocket. As I inserted it into the lock I noticed, inscribed into the brass seat of the lock:

Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards.

There were other inscriptions all over the black leather panelling of the door, cut in the same neat script, the lines crossing each other at random, like filigree decoration around a baroque salver.

Closing the door behind me, I walked into the lounge. The walls seemed darker than usual, and I realized that their entire surface was covered with row upon row of finely cut lettering, endless fragments of verse stretching from ceiling to floor.

I picked my glass off the table and raised it to my lips. The blue crystal bowl had been embossed with the same copperplate lines, spiralling down the stem to the base.

Drink to me only with thine eyes.

Everything in the lounge was covered with the same fragments – the desk, lampstands and shades, the bookshelves, the keys of the baby grand, even the lip of the record on the stereogram turntable.

Dazed, I raised my hand to my face, in horror saw that the surface of my skin was interlaced by a thousand tattoos, writhing and coiling across my hands and arms like insane serpents.

Dropping my glass, I ran to the mirror over the fireplace, saw my face covered with the same tattooing, a living manuscript in which the ink still ran, the letters running and changing as if the pen still cast them.

You spotted snakes with double tongue . . .
Weaving spiders, come not here.

I flung myself away from the mirror, ran out on to the terrace, my feet slipping in the piles of coloured streamers which the evening wind was carrying over the balcony, then vaulted down over the railing on to the ground below.

I covered the distance between our villas in a few moments, raced up the darkening drive to the black front door. It opened as my hand reached for the bell, and I plunged through into the crystal hallway.

Aurora Day was waiting for me on the chaise longue by the fountain pool, feeding the ancient white fish that clustered around her. As I stepped across to her she smiled quietly to the fish and whispered to them.

'Aurora!' I cried. 'For heaven's sake, I give in! Take anything you want, anything, but leave me alone!'

For a moment she ignored me and went on quietly feeding the fish. Suddenly a thought of terror plunged through my mind. Were the huge white carp now nestling at her fingers once her lovers?

We sat together in the luminescent dusk, the long shadows playing across the purple landscape of Dali's 'Persistence of Memory' on the wall behind Aurora, the fish circling slowly in the fountain beside us.

She had stated her terms: nothing less than absolute control of the magazine, freedom to impose her own policy, to make her own selection of material. Nothing would be printed without her first approval.

'Don't worry,' she had said lightly. 'Our agreement will apply to one issue only.' Amazingly she showed no wish to publish her own poems – the pirated issue had merely been a device to bring me finally to surrender.

'Do you think one issue will be enough?' I asked, wondering what really she would do with it now.

She looked up at me idly, tracing patterns across the surface of the pool with a green-tipped finger. 'It all depends on you and your companions. When will you come to your senses and become poets again?'

I watched the patterns in the pool. In some miraculous way they remained etched across the surface.

In the hours, like millennia, we had sat together I seemed to have told her everything about myself, yet learned almost nothing about Aurora. One thing alone was clear – her obsession with the art of poetry. In some curious way she regarded herself as personally responsible for the present ebb at which it found itself, but her only remedy seemed completely retrogressive.

'You must come and meet my friends at the colony,' I suggested.

'I will,' she said. 'I hope I can help them. They all have so much to learn.'

I smiled at this. 'I'm afraid you won't find them very sympathetic to that view. Most of them regard themselves as virtuosos. For them the quest for the perfect sonnet ended years ago. The computer produces nothing else.'

Aurora scoffed. 'They're not poets but mere mechanics. Look at these collections of so-called verse. Three poems and sixty pages of operating instructions. Nothing but volts and amps. When I say they have everything to learn, I mean about their own hearts, not about technique; about the soul of music, not its form.'

She paused to stretch herself, her beautiful body uncoiling like a python. She leaned forward and began to speak earnestly. 'Poetry is dead today, not because of these machines, but because poets no longer search for their true inspiration.'

'Which is?'

Aurora shook her head sadly. 'You call yourself a poet and yet you ask me that?'

She stared down at the pool, her eyes listless. For a moment an expression of profound sadness passed across her face, and I realized that she felt some deep sense of guilt or inadequacy, that some failing of her own was responsible for the present malaise. Perhaps it was this sense of inadequacy that made me unafraid of her.

'Have you ever heard the legend of Melander and Corydon?' she asked.

'Vaguely,' I said, casting my mind back. 'Melander was the Muse of Poetry, if I remember. Wasn't Corydon a court poet who killed himself for her?'

'Good,' Aurora told me. 'You're not completely illiterate, after all. Yes, the court poets found that they had lost their inspiration and that their ladies were spurning them for the company of the knights, so they sought out Melander, the Muse, who told them that she had brought this spell upon them because they had taken their art for granted, forgetting the source from whom it really came. They protested that of course they thought of her always – a blatant lie – but she refused to believe them and told them that they would not recover their power until one of them

sacrificed his life for her. Naturally none of them would do so, with the exception of a young poet of great talent called Corydon, who loved the goddess and was the only one to retain his power. For the other poets' sake he killed himself . . .'

'. . . to Melander's undying sorrow,' I concluded. 'She was not expecting him to give his life for his art. A beautiful myth,' I agreed. 'But I'm afraid you'll find no Corydons here.'

'I wonder,' Aurora said softly. She stirred the water in the pool, the broken surface throwing a ripple of light across the walls and ceiling. Then I saw that a long series of friezes ran around the lounge depicting the very legend Aurora had been describing. The first panel, on my extreme left, showed the poets and troubadours gathered around the goddess, a tall white-gowned figure whose face bore a remarkable resemblance to Aurora's. As I traced the story through the successive panels the likeness became even more marked, and I assumed that she had sat as Melander for the artist. Had she, in some way, identified herself with the goddess in the myth? In which case, who was her Corydon? – perhaps the artist himself. I searched the panels for the suicidal poet, a slim blond-maned youth whose face, although slightly familiar, I could not identify. However, behind the principal figures in all the scenes I certainly recognized another, her faun-faced chauffeur, here with ass's legs and wild woodwind, representing none other than the attendant Pan.

I had almost detected another likeness among the figures in the friezes when Aurora noticed me searching the panels. She stopped stirring the pool. As the ripples subsided the panels sank again into darkness. For a few seconds Aurora stared at me as if she had forgotten who I was. She appeared to have become tired and withdrawn, as if recapitulating the myth had evoked private memories of pain and fatigue. Simultaneously the hallway and glass-enclosed portico seemed to grow dark and sombre, reflecting her own darkening mood, so dominant was her presence that the air itself paled as she did. Again I felt that her world, into which I had stepped, was completely compounded of illusion.

She was asleep. Around her the room was almost in darkness. The pool lights had faded, the crystal columns that had shone around us were dull and extinguished, like trunks of opaque glass. The only light came from the flower-like jewel between her sleeping breasts.

I stood up and walked softly across to her, looked down at her strange face, its skin smooth and grey, like some pharaonic bride in a basalt dream. Then, beside me at the door I noticed the hunched figure of the chauffeur. His peaked cap hid his face, but the two watchful eyes were fixed on me like small coals.

As we left, hundreds of sleeping sand-rays were dotted about the moonlit floor of the desert. We stepped between them and moved away silently in the Cadillac.

When I reached the villa I went straight into the study, ready to

start work on assembling the next issue. During the return ride I had quickly decided on the principal cue-themes and key-images which I would play into the VT sets. All programmed for maximum repetition, within twenty-four hours I would have a folio of moon-sick, muse-mad dithyrambs which would stagger Aurora Day by their heartfelt simplicity and inspiration.

As I entered the study my shoe caught on something sharp. I bent down in the darkness, and found a torn strip of computer circuitry embedded in the white leather flooring.

When I switched on the light I saw that someone had smashed the three VT sets, pounding them to a twisted pulp in a savage excess of violence.

Mine had not been the only targets. Next morning, as I sat at my desk contemplating the three wrecked computers, the telephone rang with news of similar outrages all the way down the Stars. Tony Sapphire's 50-watt IBM had been hammered to pieces, and Raymond Mayo's four new Philco Versomatics had been smashed beyond hope of repair. As far as I could gather, not a single VT set had been left untouched. The previous evening, between the hours of six and midnight, someone had moved rapidly down the Stars, slipped into the studios and apartments and singlemindedly wrecked every VT set.

I had a good idea who. As I climbed out of the Cadillac on my return from Aurora I had noticed two heavy wrenches on the seat beside the chauffeur. However, I decided not to call the police and prefer charges. For one thing, the problem of filling *Wave IX* now looked almost insoluble. When I telephoned Graphis Press I found, more or less as expected, that all Aurora's copy had been mysteriously mislaid.

The problem remained – what would I put in the issue? I couldn't afford to miss an edition or my subscribers would fade away like ghosts.

I telephoned Aurora and pointed this out.

'We should go to press again within a week, otherwise our contract expires and I'll never get another. And reimbursing a year's advance subscriptions would bankrupt me. We've simply got to find some copy. As the new managing editor have you any suggestions?'

Aurora chuckled. 'I suppose you're thinking that I might mysteriously reassemble all those smashed machines?'

'It's an idea,' I agreed, waving at Tony Sapphire who had just called in. 'Otherwise I'm afraid we're never going to get any copy.'

'I can't understand you,' Aurora replied: 'Surely there's one very simple method.'

'Is there? What's that?'

'Write some yourself!'

Before I could protest she burst into a peal of high laughter. 'I gather there are some twenty-three able-bodied versifiers and so-called poets in Vermilion Sands' – this was exactly the number of places broken into the previous evening – 'well, let's see some of them versify.'

'Aurora!' I snapped. 'You can't be serious. Listen, for heaven's sake, this is no joking –'

But she had put the phone down. I turned to Tony Sapphire, then sat back limply and contemplated an intact tape spool I had recovered from one of the sets. 'It looks as if I've had it. Did you hear that – "Write some yourself"?'

'She must be insane,' Tony agreed.

'It's all part of this tragic obsession of hers,' I explained, lowering my voice. 'She genuinely believes she's the Muse of Poetry, returned to earth to re-inspire the dying race of poets. Last night she referred to the myth of Melander and Corydon. I think she's seriously waiting for some young poet to give his life for her.'

Tony nodded. 'She's missing the point, though. Fifty years ago a few people wrote poetry, but no one read it. Now no one writes it either. The VT set merely simplifies the whole process.'

I agreed with him, but of course Tony was somewhat prejudiced there, being one of those people who believed that literature was in essence both unreadable and unwritable. The automatic novel he had been 'writing' was over ten million words long, intended to be one of those gigantic grotesques that tower over the highways of literary history, terrifying the unwary traveller. Unfortunately he had never bothered to get it printed, and the memory drum which carried the electronic coding had been wrecked in the previous night's pogrom.

I was equally annoyed. One of my VT sets had been steadily producing a transliteration of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in terms of a Hellenic Greek setting, a pleasant academic exercise which would have provided an objective test of Joyce's masterpiece by the degree of exactness with which the transliteration matched the original Odyssey. This too had been destroyed.

We watched Studio 5 in the bright morning light. The cerise Cadillac had disappeared somewhere, so presumably Aurora was driving around Vermilion Sands, astounding the café crowds.

I picked up the terrace telephone and sat on the rail. 'I suppose I might as well call everyone up and see what they can do.'

I dialled the first number.

Raymond Mayo said: 'Write some myself? Paul, you're insane.'

Xero Paris said: 'Myself? Of course, Paul, with my toes.'

Fairchild de Mille said: 'It would be rather chic, but . . .'

Kurt Butterworth said, sourly: 'Ever tried to? How?'

Marlene McClintic said: 'Darling, I wouldn't dare. It might develop the wrong muscles or something.'

Sigismund Lutitsch said. 'No, no. Siggy now in new zone. Electronic sculpture, plasma in super-cosmic collisions. Listen –'

Robin Saunders, Macmillan Freebody and Angel Petit said: 'No.'

* * *

Tony brought me a drink and I pressed on down the list. 'It's no good,' I said at last. 'No one writes verse any more. Let's face it. After all, do you or I?'

Tony pointed to the notebook. 'There's one name left – we might as well sweep the decks clean before we take off for Red Beach.'

'Tristram Caldwell,' I read. 'That's the shy young fellow with the footballer's build. Something is always wrong with his set. Might as well try him.'

A soft honey-voiced girl answered the phone.

'Tristram?' she purred. 'Er, yes, I think he's here.'

There were sounds of wrestling around on a bed, during which the telephone bounced on the floor a few times, and then Caldwell answered.

'Hello, Ransom, what can I do for you?'

'Tristram,' I said, 'I take it you were paid the usual surprise call last night. Or didn't you notice? How's your VT set?'

'VT set?' he repeated. 'It's fine, just fine.'

'What?' I shouted. 'You mean yours is undamaged? Tristram, pull yourself together and listen to me!' Quickly I explained our problem, but Tristram suddenly began to laugh.

'Well, I think that's just damn funny, don't you? Really rich. I think she's right. Let's get back to the old crafts –'

'Never mind the old crafts,' I told him irritably. 'All I'm interested in is getting some copy together for the next issue. If your set is working we're saved.'

'Well there, wait a minute, Paul. I've been slightly preoccupied recently, haven't had a chance to see the set.'

I waited while he wandered off. From the sounds of his footsteps and an impatient shout of the girl's, to which he replied distantly, it seemed he had gone outside into the yard. A door slammed open somewhere and there was a vague rummaging. A curious place to keep a VT set, I thought. Then there was a loud hammering noise.

Finally Tristram picked up the phone again. 'Sorry, Paul, but it looks as if she paid me a visit too. The set's a total wreck.' He paused while I cursed the air, then said: 'Look, though, is she really serious about the hand-made material? I take it that's what you were calling about?'

'Yes,' I told him. 'Believe me, I'll print anything. It has to get past Aurora, though. Have you got any old copy lying around?'

Tristram chuckled again. 'You know, Paul, old boy, I believe I have. Rather despaired of ever getting it into print but I'm glad now I held on to it. Tell you what, I'll tidy it up and let you have it tomorrow. Few sonnets, a ballad or two, you should find it interesting.'

He was right. Five minutes after I opened his parcel the next morning I knew he was trying to fool us.

'This is the same old thing,' I explained to Tony. 'That cunning Adonis. Look at these assonances and feminine rhymes, the drifting caesura – the

unmistakable Caldwell signature, worn tapes on the rectifier circuits and a leaking condenser. I've been having to re-tread these for years to smooth them out. He's got his set there working away after all.'

'What are you going to do?' Tony asked. 'He'll just deny it.'

'Obviously. Anyway, I can use the material. Who cares if the whole issue is by Tristram Caldwell.'

I started to slip the pages into an envelope before taking them round to Aurora, when an idea occurred to me.

'Tony, I've just had another of my brilliancies. The perfect method of curing this witch of her obsession and exacting sweet revenge at the same time. Suppose we play along with Tristram and tell Aurora that these poems were hand-written by him. His style is thoroughly retrograde and his themes are everything Aurora could ask for – listen to these – "Homage to Cleo", "Minerva 231", "Silence becomes Electra". She'll pass them for press, we'll print this weekend and then, lo and behold, we reveal that these poems apparently born out of the burning breast of Tristram Caldwell are nothing more than a collection of cliché-ridden transcripts from a derelict VT set, the worst possible automatic maunderings.'

Tony whooped. 'Tremendous! She'd never live it down. But do you think she'll be taken in?'

'Why not? Haven't you realized that she sincerely expects us all to sit down and produce a series of model classical exercises on "Night and Day", "Summer and Winter", and so on. When only Caldwell produces anything she'll be only too glad to give him her imprimatur. Remember, our agreement only refers to this issue, and the onus is on her. She's got to find material somewhere.'

So we launched our scheme. All afternoon I pestered Tristram, telling him that Aurora had adored his first consignment and was eager to see more. Duly the next day a second batch arrived, all, as luck would have it, in longhand, although remarkably faded for material fresh from his VT set the previous day. However, I was only too glad for anything that would reinforce the illusion. Aurora was more and more pleased, and showed no suspicions whatever. Here and there she made a minor criticism but refused to have anything altered or rewritten.

'But we always rewrite, Aurora,' I told her. 'One can't expect an infallible selection of images. The number of synonyms is too great.' Wondering whether I had gone too far, I added hastily: 'It doesn't matter whether the author is man or robot, the principle is the same.'

'Really?' Aurora said archly. 'However, I think we'll leave these just as Mr Caldwell wrote them.'

I didn't bother to point out the hopeless fallacy in her attitude, and merely collected the initialled manuscripts and hurried home with them. Tony was at my desk, deep in the phone, pumping Tristram for more copy.

He capped the mouthpiece and gestured to me. 'He's playing coy,

probably trying to raise us to two cents a thousand. Pretends he's out of material. Is it worth calling his bluff?'

I shook my head. 'Dangerous. If Aurora discovers we're involved in this fraud of Tristram's she might do anything. Let me talk to him.' I took the phone. 'What's the matter, Tristram, production's way down. We need more material, old boy. Shorten the line, why are you wasting tapes with all these alexandrines?'

'Ransom, what the hell are you talking about? I'm not a damned factory, I'm a poet, I write when I have something to say in the only suitable way to say it.'

'Yes, yes,' I rejoined, 'but I have fifty pages to fill and only a few days in which to do it. You've given me about ten so you've just got to keep up the flow. What have you produced today?'

'Well, I'm working on another sonnet, some nice things in it – to Aurora herself, as a matter of fact.'

'Great,' I told him, 'but careful with those vocabulary selectors. Remember the golden rule: the ideal sentence is one word long. What else have you got?'

'What else? Nothing. This is likely to take all week, perhaps all year.'

I nearly swallowed the phone. 'Tristram, what's the matter? For heaven's sake, haven't you paid the power bill or something? Have they cut you off?'

Before I could find out, however, he had rung off.

'One sonnet a day,' I said to Tony. 'Good God, he must be on manual. Crazy idiot, he probably doesn't realize how complicated those circuits are.'

We sat tight and waited. Nothing came the next morning, and nothing the morning after that. Luckily, however, Aurora wasn't in the least surprised; in fact, if anything she was pleased that Tristram's rate of progress was slowing.

'One poem is enough,' she told me, 'a complete statement. Nothing more needs to be said, an interval of eternity closes for ever.'

Reflectively, she straightened the petals of a hyacinth. 'Perhaps he needs a little encouragement,' she decided.

I could see she wanted to meet him.

'Why don't you ask him over for dinner?' I suggested.

She brightened immediately. 'I will.' She picked up the telephone and handed it to me.

As I dialled Tristram's number I felt a sudden pang of envy and disappointment. Around me the friezes told the story of Melander and Corydon, but I was too preoccupied to anticipate the tragedy the next week would bring.

During the days that followed Tristram and Aurora Day were always together. In the morning they would usually drive out to the film sets

at Lagoon West, the chauffeur at the wheel of the huge Cadillac. In the evenings, as I sat out alone on the terrace, watching the lights of Studio 5 shine out into the warm darkness, I could hear their fragmented voices carried across the sand, the faint sounds of crystal music.

I would like to think that I resented their relationship, but to be truthful I cared very little after the initial disappointment had worn off. The beach fatigue from which I suffered numbed the senses insidiously, blunting despair and hope alike.

When, three days after their first meeting, Aurora and Tristram suggested that we all go ray-fishing at Lagoon West, I accepted gladly, eager to observe their affair at closer quarters.

As we set off down the Stars there was no hint of what was to come. Tristram and Aurora were together in the Cadillac while Tony Sapphire, Raymond Mayo and I brought up the rear in Tony's Chevrolet. We could see them through the blue rear window of the Cadillac, Tristram reading the sonnet to Aurora which he had just completed. When we climbed out of the cars at Lagoon West and made our way over to the old abstract film sets near the sand reefs, they were walking hand in hand. Tristram in his white beach shoes and suit looked very much like an Edwardian dandy at a boating party.

The chauffeur carried the picnic hampers, and Raymond Mayo and Tony the spear-guns and nets. Down the reefs below we could see the rays nesting by the thousands, scores of double mambas sleek with off-season hibernation.

After we had settled ourselves under the awnings Raymond and Tristram decided on the course and then gathered everyone together. Strung out in a loose line we began to make our way down into one of the reefs, Aurora on Tristram's arm.

'Ever done any ray-fishing?' Tristram asked me as we entered one of the lower galleries.

'Never,' I said. 'I'll just watch this time. I hear you're quite an expert.'

'Well, with luck I won't be killed.' He pointed to the rays clinging to the cornices above us, wheeling up into the sky as we approached, whistling and screeching. In the dim light the white tips of their stings flexed in their sheaths. 'Unless they're really frightened they'll stay well away from you,' he told us. 'The art is to prevent them from becoming frightened, select one and approach it so slowly that it sits staring at you until you're close enough to shoot it.'

Raymond Mayo had found a large purple mamba resting in a narrow crevice about ten yards on our right. He moved up to it quietly, watching the sting protrude from its sheath and weave menacingly, waiting just long enough for it to retract, lulling the ray with a low humming sound. Finally, when he was five feet away, he raised the gun and took careful aim.

'There may seem little to it,' Tristram whispered to Aurora and me,

'but in fact he's completely at the ray's mercy now. If it chose to attack he'd be defenceless.' The bolt snapped from Raymond's gun and struck the ray on its spinal crest, stunning it instantly. Quickly he stepped over and scooped it into the net, where it revived after a few seconds, threshed its black triangular wings helplessly and then lay inertly.

We moved through the groynes and galleries, the sky a narrow winding interval overhead, following the pathways that curved down into the bed of the reef. Now and then the wheeling rays rising out of our way would brush against the reef and drifts of fine sand would cascade over us. Raymond and Tristram shot several more rays, leaving the chauffeur to carry the nets. Gradually our party split into two, Tony and Raymond taking one pathway with the chauffeur, while I stayed with Aurora and Tristram.

As we moved along I noticed that Aurora's face had become less relaxed, her movements slightly more deliberate and controlled. I had the impression she was watching Tristram carefully, glancing sideways at him as she held his arm.

We entered the terminal fornix of the reef, a deep cathedral-like chamber from which a score of galleries spiralled off to surface like the arms of a galaxy. In the darkness around us the thousands of rays hung motionlessly, their phosphorescing stings flexing and retracting like winking stars.

Two hundred feet away, on the far side of the chamber, Raymond Mayo and the chauffeur emerged from one of the galleries. They waited there for a few moments. Suddenly I heard Tony shouting out. Raymond dropped his spear-gun and disappeared into the gallery.

Excusing myself, I ran across the chamber. I found them in the narrow corridor, peering around in the darkness.

'I tell you,' Tony was insisting. 'I heard the damn thing singing.'

'Impossible,' Raymond told him. They argued with each other, then gave up the search for the mysterious song-ray and stepped down into the chamber. As we went I thought I saw the chauffeur replace something in his pocket. With his beaked face and insane eyes, his hunched figure hung about with the nets of writhing rays, he looked like a figure from Hieronymus Bosch.

After exchanging a few words with Raymond and Tony I turned to make my way back to the others, but they had left the chamber. Wondering which of the galleries they had chosen, I stepped a few yards into the mouth of each one, finally saw them on one of the ramps curving away above me.

I was about to retrace my steps and join them when I caught a glimpse of Aurora's face in profile, saw once again her expression of watchful intent. Changing my mind, I moved quietly along the spiral, just below them, the falls of sand masking my footsteps, keeping them in view through the intervals between the overhanging columns.

At one point I was only a few yards from them, and heard Aurora say clearly: 'Isn't there a theory that you can trap rays by singing to them?'

'By mesmerizing them?' Tristram asked. 'Let's try.'

They moved farther away, and Aurora's voice sounded out softly, a low crooning tone. Gradually the sound rose, echoing and re-echoing through the high vaults, the rays stirring in the darkness.

As we neared the surface their numbers grew, and Aurora stopped and guided Tristram towards a narrow sun-filled arena, bounded by hundred-foot walls, open to the sky above.

Unable to see them now, I retreated into the gallery and climbed the inner slope on to the next level, and from there on to the stage above. I made my way to the edge of the gallery, from which I could now easily observe the arena below. As I did so, however, I was aware of an eerie and penetrating noise, at once toneless and all-pervading, which filled the entire reef, like the high-pitched sounds perceived by epileptics before a seizure. Down in the arena Tristram was searching the walls, trying to identify the source of the noise, hands raised to his head. He had taken his eyes off Aurora, who was standing behind him, arms motionless at her sides, palms slightly raised, like an entranced medium.

Fascinated by this curious stance, I was abruptly distracted by a terrified screeching that came from the lower levels of the reef. It was accompanied by a confused leathery flapping, and almost immediately a cloud of flying rays, frantically trying to escape from the reef, burst from the galleries below.

As they turned into the arena, sweeping low over the heads of Tristram and Aurora, they seemed to lose their sense of direction, and within a moment the arena was packed by a swarm of circling rays, all diving about uncertainly.

Screaming in terror at the rays whipping past her face, Aurora emerged from her trance. Tristram had taken off his straw hat and was striking furiously at them, shielding Aurora with his other arm. Together they backed towards a narrow fault in the rear wall of the arena, which provided an escape route into the galleries on the far side. Following this route to the edge of the cliffs above, I was surprised to see the squat figure of the chauffeur, now divested of his nets and gear, peering down at the couple below.

By now the hundreds of rays jostling within the arena almost obscured Tristram and Aurora. She reappeared from the narrow fault, shaking her head desperately. Their escape route was sealed! Quickly Tristram motioned her to her knees, then leapt into the middle of the arena, slapping wildly at the rays with his hat, trying to drive them away from Aurora.

For a few seconds he was successful. Like a cloud of giant hornets the rays wheeled off in disorder. Horrified, I watched them descend upon him again. Before I could shout Tristram had fallen. The rays swooped and hovered over his outstretched body, then swirled away, soaring into the sky, apparently released from the vortex.

Tristram lay face downwards, his blond hair spilled across the sand, arms twisted loosely. I stared at his body, amazed by the swiftness with which he had died, and looked across to Aurora.

She too was watching the body, but with an expression that showed neither pity nor terror. Gathering her skirt in one hand, she turned and slipped away through the fault –

The escape route had been open after all! Astonished, I realized that Aurora had deliberately told Tristram that the route was closed, virtually forcing him to attack the rays.

A minute later she emerged from the mouth of the gallery above. Briefly she peered down into the arena, the black-uniformed chauffeur at her elbow, watching the motionless body of Tristram. Then they hurried away.

Racing after them, I began to shout at the top of my voice, hoping to attract Tony and Raymond Mayo. As I reached the mouth of the reef my voice boomed and echoed into the galleries below. A hundred yards away Aurora and the chauffeur were stepping into the Cadillac. With a roar of exhaust it swung away among the sets, sending up clouds of dust that obscured the enormous abstract patterns.

I ran towards Tony's car. By the time I reached it the Cadillac was half a mile away, burning across the desert like an escaping dragon.

That was the last I saw of Aurora Day. I managed to follow them as far as the highway to Lagoon West, but there, on the open road, the big car left me behind, and ten miles farther on, by the time I reached Lagoon West, I had lost them completely. At one of the gas stations where the highway forks to Vermilion Sands and Red Beach I asked if anyone had seen a cerise Cadillac go by. Two attendants said they had, on the road *towards* me, and although they both swore this, I suppose Aurora's magic must have confused them.

I decided to try her villa and took the fork back to Vermilion Sands, cursing myself for not anticipating what had happened. I, ostensibly a poet, had failed to take another poet's dreams seriously. Aurora had explicitly forecast Tristram's death.

Studio 5, The Stars, was silent and empty. The rays had gone from the drive, and the black glass door was wide open, the remains of a few streamers drifting across the dust that gathered on the floor. The hallway and lounge were in darkness, and only the white carp in the pool provided a glimmer of light. The air was still and unbroken, as if the house had been empty for centuries.

Cursorily I ran my eye round the friezes in the lounge, then saw that I knew all the faces of the figures in the panels. The likenesses were almost photographic. Tristram was Corydon, Aurora Melander, the chauffeur the god Pan. And I saw myself, Tony Sapphire, Raymond Mayo, Fairchild de Mille and the other members of the colony.

Leaving the friezes, I made my way past the pool. It was now evening, and through the open doorway were the distant lights of Vermilion Sands, the headlights sweeping along the Stars reflected in the glass roof-tiles of my villa. A light wind had risen, stirring the streamers, and as I went down the steps a gust of air moved through the house and caught the door, slamming it behind me. The loud report boomed through the house, a concluding statement upon the whole sequence of fantasy and disaster, a final notice of the departure of the enchantress.

As I walked back across the desert and last streamers were moving over the dark sand, I strode firmly through them, trying to reassemble my own reality again. The fragments of Aurora Day's insane poems caught the dying desert light as they dissolved about my feet, the fading debris of a dream.

Reaching the villa, I saw that the lights were on. I raced inside and to my astonishment discovered the blond figure of Tristram stretched out lazily in a chair on the terrace, an ice-filled glass in one hand.

He eyed me genially, winked broadly before I could speak and put a forefinger to his lips.

I stepped over to him. 'Tristram,' I whispered hoarsely. 'I thought you were dead. What on earth happened down there?'

He smiled at me. 'Sorry, Paul, I had a hunch you were watching. Aurora got away, didn't she?'

I nodded. 'Their car was too fast for the Chevrolet. But weren't you hit by one of the rays? I saw you fall, I thought you'd been killed outright.'

'So did Aurora. Neither of you know much about rays, do you? Their stings are passive in the on season, old chap, or nobody would be allowed in there.' He grinned at me. 'Ever hear of the myth of Melander and Corydon?'

I sat down weakly on the seat next to him. In two minutes he explained what had happened. Aurora had told him of the myth, and partly out of sympathy for her, and partly for amusement, he had decided to play out his role. All the while he had been describing the danger and viciousness of the rays he had been egging Aurora on deliberately, and had provided her with a perfect opportunity to stage his sacrificial murder.

'It *was* murder, of course,' I told him. 'Believe me, I saw the glint in her eye. She really wanted you killed.'

Tristram shrugged. 'Don't look so shocked, old boy. After all, poetry is a serious business.'

Raymond and Tony Sapphire knew nothing of what had happened. Tristram had put together a story of how Aurora had suffered a sudden attack of claustrophobia, and rushed off in a frenzy.

'I wonder what Aurora will do now,' Tristram mused. 'Her prophecy's been fulfilled. Perhaps she'll feel more confident of her own beauty. You know, she had a colossal sense of physical inadequacy. Like the

original Melander, who was surprised when Corydon killed himself, Aurora confused her art with her own person.'

I nodded. 'I hope she isn't too disappointed when she finds poetry is still being written in the bad old way. That reminds me, I've got twenty-five pages to fill. How's your VT set running?'

'No longer have one. Wrecked it the morning you phoned up. Haven't used the thing for years.'

I sat up. 'Do you mean that those sonnets you've been sending in are all hand-written?'

'Absolutely, old boy. Every single one a soul-grafted gem.'

I lay back groaning. 'God, I was relying on your set to save me. What the hell am I going to do?'

Tristram grinned. 'Start writing it yourself. Remember the prophecy. Perhaps it will come true. After all, Aurora thinks I'm dead.'

I cursed him roundly. 'If it's any help, I wish you were. Do you know what this is going to cost me?'

After he had gone I went into the study and added up what copy I had left, found that there were exactly twenty-three pages to fill. Oddly enough that represented one page for each of the registered poets at Vermilion Sands. Except that none of them, apart from Tristram, was capable of producing a single line.

It was midnight, but the problems facing the magazine would take every minute of the next twenty-four hours, when the final deadline expired. I had almost decided to write something myself when the telephone rang. At first I thought it was Aurora Day – the voice was high and feminine – but it was only Fairchild de Mille.

'What are you doing up so late?' I growled at him. 'Shouldn't you be getting your beauty sleep?'

'Well, I suppose I should, Paul, but do you know a rather incredible thing happened to me this evening. Tell me, are you still looking for original hand-written verse? I started writing something a couple of hours ago, it's not bad really. About Aurora Day, as a matter of fact. I think you'll like it.'

Sitting up, I congratulated him fulsomely, noting down the linage.

Five minutes later the telephone rang again. This time it was Angel Petit. He too had a few hand-written verses I might be interested in. Again, dedicated to Aurora Day.

Within the next half hour the telephone rang a score of times. Every poet in Vermilion Sands seemed to be awake. I heard from Macmillan Freebody, Robin Saunders and the rest of them. All, mysteriously that evening, had suddenly felt the urge to write something original, and in a few minutes had tossed off a couple of stanzas to the memory of Aurora Day.

I was musing over it when I stood up after the last call. It was 12.45, and I should have been tired out, but my brain felt keen and alive, a

thousand ideas running through it. A phrase formed itself in my mind. I picked up my pad and wrote it down.

Time seemed to dissolve. Within five minutes I had produced the first piece of verse I had written for over ten years. Behind it a dozen more poems lay just below the surface of my mind, waiting like gold in a loaded vein to be brought out into daylight.

Sleep would wait. I reached for another sheet of paper and then noticed a letter on the desk to the IBM agency in Red Beach, enclosing an order for three new VT sets.

Smiling to myself, I tore it into a dozen pieces.

1961

DEEP END

They always slept during the day. By dawn the last of the townsfolk had gone indoors and the houses would be silent, heat curtains locked across the windows, as the sun rose over the deliquescing salt banks. Most of them were elderly and fell asleep quickly in their darkened chalets, but Granger, with his restless mind and his one lung, often lay awake through the afternoons, while the metal outer walls of the cabin creaked and hummed, trying pointlessly to read through the old log books Holliday had salvaged for him from the crashed space platforms.

By six o'clock the thermal fronts would begin to recede southwards across the kelp flats, and one by one the air-conditioners in the bedrooms switched themselves off. While the town slowly came to life, its windows opening to the cool dusk air, Granger strode down to breakfast at the Neptune Bar, gallantly doffing his sunglasses to left and right at the old couples settling themselves out on their porches, staring at each other across the shadow-filled streets.

Five miles to the north, in the empty hotel at Idle End, Holliday usually rested quietly for another hour, and listened to the coral towers, gleaming in the distance like white pagodas, sing and whistle as the temperature gradients cut through them. Twenty miles away he could see the symmetrical peak of Hamilton, nearest of the Bermuda Islands, rising off the dry ocean floor like a flat-topped mountain, the narrow ring of white beach still visible in the sunset, a scum-line left by the sinking ocean.

That evening he felt even more reluctant than usual to drive down into the town. Not only would Granger be in his private booth at the Neptune, dispensing the same mixture of humour and homily – he was virtually the only person Holliday could talk to, and inevitably he had come to resent his dependence on the older man – but Holliday would have his final interview with the migration officer and make the decision which would determine his entire future.

In a sense the decision had already been made, as Bullen, the migration officer, realized on his trip a month earlier. He did not bother to press Holliday, who had no special skills to offer, no qualities of character or leadership which would be of use on the new worlds. However, Bullen pointed out one small but relevant fact, which Holliday duly noted and thought over in the intervening month.

'Remember, Holliday,' he warned him at the end of the interview in the requisitioned office at the rear of the sheriff's cabin, 'the average age of the settlement is over sixty. In ten years' time you and Granger may well be the only two left here, and if that lung of his goes you'll be on your own.'

He paused to let this prospect sink in, then added quietly: 'All the kids are leaving on the next trip – the Merryweathers' two boys, Tom Juranda (*that lout, good riddance*, Holliday thought to himself, *look out Mars*) – do you realize you'll literally be the only one here under the age of fifty?'

'Katy Summers is staying,' Holliday pointed out quickly, the sudden vision of a white organdy dress and long straw hair giving him courage.

The migration officer had glanced at his application list and nodded grudgingly. 'Yes, but she's just looking after her grandmother. As soon as the old girl dies Katy will be off like a flash. After all, there's nothing to keep her here, is there?'

'No,' Holliday had agreed automatically.

There wasn't now. For a long while he mistakenly believed there was. Katy was his own age, twenty-two, the only person, apart from Granger, who seemed to understand his determination to stay behind and keep watch over a forgotten Earth. But the grandmother died three days after the migration officer left, and the next day Katy had begun to pack. In some insane way Holliday had assumed that she would stay behind, and what worried him was that all his assumptions about himself might be based on equally false premises.

Climbing off the hammock, he went on to the terrace and looked out at the phosphorescent glitter of the trace minerals in the salt banks stretching away from the hotel. His quarters were in the penthouse suite on the tenth floor, the only heat-sealed unit in the building, but its steady settlement into the ocean bed had opened wide cracks in the load walls which would soon reach up to the roof. The ground floor had already disappeared. By the time the next floor went – six months at the outside – he would have been forced to leave the old pleasure resort and return to the town. Inevitably, that would mean sharing a chalet with Granger.

A mile away, an engine droned. Through the dusk Holliday saw the migration officer's helicopter whirling along towards the hotel, the only local landmark, then veer off once Bullen identified the town and circle slowly towards the landing strip.

Eight o'clock, Holliday noted. His interview was at 8.30 the next morning. Bullen would rest the night with the Sheriff, carry out his other duties as graves commissioner and justice of the peace, and then set off after seeing Holliday on the next leg of his journey. For twelve hours Holliday was free, still able to make absolute decisions (or, more accurately, not to make them) but after that he would have committed himself. This was the migration officer's last trip, his final circuit from the deserted cities near St Helena up through the Azores and Bermudas and on to the main Atlantic ferry site at the Canaries. Only two of the

big launching platforms were still in navigable orbit – hundreds of others were continuously falling out of the sky – and once they came down Earth was, to all intents, abandoned. From then on the only people likely to be picked up would be a few military communications personnel.

Twice on his way into the town Holliday had to lower the salt-plough fastened to the front bumper of the jeep and ram back the drifts which had melted across the wire roadway during the afternoon. Mutating kelp, their genetic shifts accelerated by the radio-phosphors, reared up into the air on either side of the road like enormous cacti, turning the dark salt-banks into a white lunar garden. But this evidence of the encroaching wilderness only served to strengthen Holliday's need to stay behind on Earth. Most of the nights, when he wasn't arguing with Granger at the Neptune, he would drive around the ocean floor, climbing over the crashed launching platforms, or wander with Katy Summers through the kelp forests. Sometimes he would persuade Granger to come with them, hoping that the older man's expertise – he had originally been a marine biologist – would help to sharpen his own awareness of the bathypelagic flora, but the original sea bed was buried under the endless salt hills and they might as well have been driving about the Sahara.

As he entered the Neptune – a low cream and chromium saloon which abutted the landing strip and had formerly served as a passenger lounge when thousands of migrants from the Southern Hemisphere were being shipped up to the Canaries – Granger called to him and rattled his cane against the window, pointing to the dark outline of the migration officer's helicopter parked on the apron fifty yards away.

'I know,' Holliday said in a bored voice as he went over with his drink. 'Relax, I saw him coming.'

Granger grinned at him. Holliday, with his intent serious face under an unruly thatch of blond hair, and his absolute sense of personal responsibility, always amused him.

'*You* relax,' Granger said, adjusting the shoulder pad under his Hawaiian shirt which disguised his sunken lung. (He had lost it skin-diving thirty years earlier.) '*I'm* not going to fly to Mars next week.'

Holliday stared sombrely into his glass. 'I'm not either.' He looked up at Granger's wry saturnine face, then added sardonically. 'Or didn't you know?'

Granger roared, tapping the window with his cane as if to dismiss the helicopter. 'Seriously, you're not going? You've made up your mind?'

'Wrong. And right. I haven't made up my mind yet – but at the same time I'm not going. You appreciate the distinction?'

'Perfectly, Dr Schopenhauer.' Granger began to grin again. He pushed away his glass. 'You know, Holliday, your trouble is that you take yourself too seriously. You don't realize how ludicrous you are.'

'Ludicrous? Why?' Holliday asked guardedly.

'What does it matter whether you've made up your mind or not? The

only thing that counts now is to get together enough courage to head straight for the Canaries and take off into the wide blue yonder. For heaven's sake, what are you staying for? Earth is dead and buried. Past, present and future no longer exist here. Don't you feel any responsibility to your own biological destiny?'

'Spare me that.' Holliday pulled a ration card from his shirt pocket, passed it across to Granger, who was responsible for the stores allocations. 'I need a new pump on the lounge refrigerator. 30-watt Frigidaire. Any left?'

Granger groaned, took the card with a snort of exasperation. 'Good God, man, you're just a Robinson Crusoe in reverse, tinkering about with all these bits of old junk, trying to fit them together. You're the last man on the beach who decides to stay behind after everyone else has left. Maybe you are a poet and dreamer, but don't you realize that those two species are extinct now?'

Holliday stared out at the helicopter on the apron, at the lights of the settlement reflected against the salt hills that encircled the town. Each day they moved a little nearer, already it was difficult to get together a weekly squad to push them back. In ten years' time his position might well be that of a Crusoe. Luckily the big water and kerosene tanks – giant cylinders, the size of gasometers – held enough for fifty years. Without them, of course, he would have had no choice.

'Let's give me a rest,' he said to Granger. 'You're merely trying to find in me a justification for your own enforced stay. Perhaps I am extinct, but I'd rather cling to life here than vanish completely. Anyway, I have a hunch that one day they'll be coming back. Someone's got to stay behind and keep alive a sense of what life here has meant. This isn't an old husk we can throw away when we've finished with it. We were born here. It's the only place we really remember.'

Granger nodded slowly. He was about to speak when a brilliant white arc crossed the darkened window, then soared out of sight, its point of impact with the ground lost behind one of the storage tanks.

Holliday stood up and craned out of the window.

'Must be a launching platform. Looked like a big one, probably one of the Russians'.' A long rolling crump reverberated through the night air, echoing away among the coral towers. Flashes of light flared up briefly. There was a series of smaller explosions, and then a wide diffuse pall of steam fanned out across the north-west.

'Lake Atlantic,' Granger commented. 'Let's drive out there and have a look. It may have uncovered something interesting.'

Half an hour later, a set of Granger's old sample beakers, slides and mounting equipment in the back seat, they set off in the jeep towards the southern tip of Lake Atlantic ten miles away.

It was here that Holliday discovered the fish.

* * *

Lake Atlantic, a narrow ribbon of stagnant brine ten miles in length by a mile wide, to the north of the Bermuda Islands, was all that remained of the former Atlantic Ocean, and was, in fact, the sole remnant of the oceans which had once covered two-thirds of the Earth's surface. The frantic mining of the oceans in the previous century to provide oxygen for the atmospheres of the new planets had made their decline swift and irreversible, and with their death had come climatic and other geophysical changes which ensured the extinction of Earth itself. As the oxygen extracted electrolytically from sea-water was compressed and shipped away, the hydrogen released was discharged into the atmosphere. Eventually only a narrow layer of denser, oxygen-containing air was left, little more than a mile in depth, and those people remaining on Earth were forced to retreat into the ocean beds, abandoning the poisoned continental tables.

At the hotel at Idle End, Holliday spent uncounted hours going through the library he had accumulated of magazines and books about the cities of the old Earth, and Granger often described to him his own youth when the seas had been half-full and he had worked as a marine biologist at the University of Miami, a fabulous laboratory unfolding itself for him on the lengthening beaches.

'The seas are our corporate memory,' he often said to Holliday. 'In draining them we deliberately obliterated our own pasts, to a large extent our own self-identities. That's another reason why you should leave. Without the sea, life is insupportable. We become nothing more than the ghosts of memories, blind and homeless, flitting through the dry chambers of a gutted skull.'

They reached the lake within half an hour, worked their way through the swamps which formed its banks. In the dim light the grey salt dunes ran on for miles, their hollows cracked into hexagonal plates, a dense cloud of vapour obscuring the surface of the water. They parked on a low promontory by the edge of the lake and looked up at the great circular shell of the launching platform. This was one of the larger vehicles, almost three hundred yards in diameter, lying upside down in the shallow water, its hull dented and burnt, riven by huge punctures where the power plants had torn themselves loose on impact and exploded off across the lake. A quarter of a mile away, hidden by the blur, they could just see a cluster of rotors pointing up into the sky.

Walking along the bank, the main body of the lake on their right, they moved nearer the platform, tracing out its riveted CCCP markings along the rim. The giant vehicle had cut enormous grooves through the nexus of pools just beyond the tip of the lake, and Granger waded through the warm water, searching for specimens. Here and there were small anemones and starfish, stunted bodies twisted by cancers. Web-like algae draped themselves over his rubber boots, their nuclei beading like jewels in the phosphorescent light. They paused by one of the largest pools, a circular

basin 300 feet across, draining slowly as the water poured out through a breach in its side. Granger moved carefully down the deepening bank, forking specimens into the rack of beakers, while Holliday stood on the narrow causeway between the pool and the lake, looking up at the dark overhang of the space platform as it loomed into the darkness above him like the stern of a ship.

He was examining the shattered air-lock of one of the crew domes when he suddenly saw something move across the surface of the deck. For a moment he imagined that he had seen a passenger who had somehow survived the vehicle's crash, then realized that it was merely the reflection in the aluminized skin of a ripple in the pool behind him.

He turned around to see Granger, ten feet below him, up to his knees in the water, staring out carefully across the pool.

'Did you throw something?' Granger asked.

Holliday shook his head. 'No.' Without thinking, he added: 'It must have been a fish jumping.'

'Fish? There isn't a single fish alive on the entire planet. The whole zoological class died out ten years ago. Strange, though.'

Just then the fish jumped again.

For a few moments, standing motionless in the half-light, they watched it together, as its slim silver body leapt frantically out of the tepid shallow water, its short glistening arcs carrying it to and fro across the pool.

'Dog-fish,' Granger muttered. 'Shark family. Highly adaptable – need to be, to have survived here. Damn it, it may well be the only fish still living.'

Holliday moved down the bank, his feet sinking in the oozing mud. 'Isn't the water too salty?'

Granger bent down and scooped up some of the water, sipped it tentatively. 'Saline, but comparatively dilute.' He glanced over his shoulder at the lake. 'Perhaps there's continuous evaporation off the lake surface and local condensation here. A freak distillation couple.' He slapped Holliday on the shoulder. 'Holliday, this should be interesting.'

The dog-fish was leaping frantically towards them, its two-foot body twisting and flicking. Low mud banks were emerging all over the surface of the pool; in only a few places towards the centre was the water more than a foot deep.

Holliday pointed to the breach in the bank fifty yards away, gestured Granger after him and began to run towards it.

Five minutes later they had effectively dammed up the breach. Holliday returned for the jeep and drove it carefully through the winding saddles between the pools. He lowered the ramp and began to force the sides of the fish-pool in towards each other. After two or three hours he had narrowed the diameter from a hundred yards to under sixty, and the depth of the water had increased to over two feet. The dog-fish had ceased to jump and swam smoothly just below the surface, snapping at

the countless small plants which had been tumbled into the water by the jeep's ramp. Its slim white body seemed white and unmarked, the small fins trim and powerful.

Granger sat on the bonnet of the jeep, his back against the windshield, watching Holliday with admiration.

'You obviously have hidden reserves,' he said ungrudgingly. 'I didn't think you had it in you.'

Holliday washed his hands in the water, then stepped over the churned mud which formed the boundary of the pool. A few feet behind him the dog-fish veered and lunged.

'I want to keep it alive,' Holliday said matter-of-factly. 'Don't you see, Granger, the fishes stayed behind when the first amphibians emerged from the seas two hundred million years ago, just as you and I, in turn, are staying behind now. In a sense all fish are images of ourselves seen in the sea's mirror.'

He slumped down on the running board. His clothes were soaked and streaked with salt, and he gasped at the damp air. To the west, just above the long bulk of the Florida coastline, rising from the ocean floor like an enormous aircraft carrier, were the first dawn thermal fronts. 'Will it be all right to leave it until this evening?'

Granger climbed into the driving seat. 'Don't worry. Come on, you need a rest.' He pointed up at the overhanging rim of the launching platform. 'That should shade it for a few hours, help to keep the temperature down.'

As they neared the town Granger slowed to wave to the old people retreating from their porches, fixing the shutters on the steel cabins.

'What about your interview with Bullen?' he asked Holliday soberly. 'He'll be waiting for you.'

'Leave here? After last night? It's out of the question.'

Granger shook his head as he parked the car outside the Neptune. 'Aren't you rather over-estimating the importance of one dog-fish? There were millions of them once, the vermin of the sea.'

'You're missing the point,' Holliday said, sinking back into the seat, trying to wipe the salt out of his eyes. 'That fish means that there's still something to be done here. Earth isn't dead and exhausted after all. We can breed new forms of life, a completely new biological kingdom.'

Eyes fixed on this private vision, Holliday sat holding the steering wheel while Granger went into the bar to collect a crate of beer. On his return the migration officer was with him.

Bullen put a foot on the running board, looked into the car. 'Well, how about it, Holliday? I'd like to make an early start. If you're not interested I'll be off. There's a rich new life out there, first step to the stars. Tom Juranda and the Merryweather boys are leaving next week. Do you want to be with them?'

'Sorry,' Holliday said curtly. He pulled the crate of beer into the car

and let out the clutch, gunned the jeep away down the empty street in a roar of dust.

Half an hour later, as he stepped out on to the terrace at Idle End, cool and refreshed after his shower, he watched the helicopter roar overhead, its black propeller scudding, then disappear over the kelp flats towards the hull of the wrecked space platform.

'Come on, let's go! What's the matter?'

'Hold it,' Granger said. 'You're getting over-eager. Don't interfere too much, you'll kill the damn thing with kindness. What have you got there?' He pointed to the can Holliday had placed in the dashboard compartment.

'Breadcrumbs.'

Granger sighed, then gently closed the door. 'I'm impressed. I really am. I wish you'd look after me this way. I'm gasping for air too.'

They were five miles from the lake when Holliday leaned forward over the wheel and pointed to the crisp tyre-prints in the soft salt flowing over the road ahead.

'Someone's there already.'

Granger shrugged. 'What of it? They've probably gone to look at the platform.' He chuckled quietly. 'Don't you want to share the New Eden with anyone else? Or just you alone, and a consultant biologist?'

Holliday peered through the windshield. 'Those platforms annoy me, the way they're hurled down as if Earth were a garbage dump. Still, if it wasn't for this one I wouldn't have found the fish.'

They reached the lake and made their way towards the pool, the erratic track of the car ahead winding in and out of the pools. Two hundred yards from the platform it had been parked, blocking the route for Holliday and Granger.

'That's the Merryweathers' car,' Holliday said as they walked around the big stripped-down Buick, slashed with yellow paint and fitted with sirens and pennants. 'The two boys must have come out here.'

Granger pointed. 'One of them's up on the platform.'

The younger brother had climbed on to the rim, was shouting down like an umpire at the antics of two other boys, one his brother, the other Tom Juranda, a tall broad-shouldered youth in a space cadet's jerkin. They were standing at the edge of the fish-pool, stones and salt blocks in their hands, hurling them into the pool.

Leaving Granger, Holliday sprinted on ahead, shouting at the top of his voice. Too preoccupied to hear him, the boys continued to throw their missiles into the pool, while the younger Merryweather egged them on from the platform above. Just before Holliday reached them Tom Juranda ran a few yards along the bank and began to kick the mud-wall into the air, then resumed his target throwing.

'Juranda! Get away from there!' Holliday bellowed. 'Put those stones down!'

He reached Juranda as the youth was about to hurl a brick-sized lump of salt into the pool, seized him by the shoulder and flung him round, knocking the salt out of his hand into a shower of damp crystals, then lunged at the elder Merryweather boy, kicking him away.

The pool had been drained. A deep breach had been cut through the bank and the water had poured out into the surrounding gulleys and pools. Down in the centre of the basin, in a litter of stones and spattered salt, was the crushed but still wriggling body of the dog-fish, twisting itself helplessly in the bare inch of water that remained. Dark red blood poured from wounds in its body, staining the salt.

Holliday hurled himself at Juranda, shook the youth savagely by the shoulders.

'Juranda! Do you realize what you've done, you –' Exhausted, Holliday released him and staggered down into the centre of the pool, kicked away the stones and stood looking at the fish twitching at his feet.

'Sorry, Holliday,' the older Merryweather boy said tentatively behind him. 'We didn't know it was your fish.'

Holliday waved him away, then let his arms fall limply to his sides. He felt numbed and baffled, unable to resolve his anger and frustration.

Tom Juranda began to laugh, and shouted something derisively. Their tension broken, the boys turned and ran off together across the dunes towards their car, yelling and playing catch with each other, mimicking Holliday's outrage.

Granger let them go by, then walked across to the pool, wincing when he saw the empty basin.

'Holliday,' he called. 'Come on.'

Holliday shook his head, staring at the beaten body of the fish.

Granger stepped down the bank to him. Sirens hooted in the distance as the Buick roared off. 'Those damn children.' He took Holliday gently by the arm. 'I'm sorry,' he said quietly. 'But it's not the end of the world.'

Bending down, Holliday reached towards the fish, lying still now, the mud around it slick with blood. His hands hesitated, then retreated.

'Nothing we can do, is there?' he said impersonally.

Granger examined the fish. Apart from the large wound in its side and the flattened skull the skin was intact. 'Why not have it stuffed?' he suggested seriously.

Holliday stared at him incredulously, his face contorting. For a moment he said nothing. Then, almost berserk, he shouted: 'Have it stuffed? Are you crazy? Do you think I want to make a dummy of myself, fill my own head with straw?'

Turning on his heel, he shouldered past Granger and swung himself roughly out of the pool.

1961

THE OVERLOADED MAN

Faulkner was slowly going insane.

After breakfast he waited impatiently in the lounge while his wife tidied up in the kitchen. She would be gone within two or three minutes, but for some reason he always found the short wait each morning almost unbearable. As he drew the Venetian blinds and readied the reclining chair on the veranda he listened to Julia moving about efficiently. In the same strict sequence she stacked the cups and plates in the dishwasher, slid the pot roast for that evening's dinner into the auto-cooker and selected the alarm, lowered the air-conditioner, refrigerator and immersion heater settings, switched open the oil storage manifolds for the delivery tanker that afternoon, and retracted her section of the garage door.

Faulkner followed the sequence with admiration, counting off each successive step as the dials clicked and snapped.

You ought to be in B-52's, he thought, or in the control house of a petrochemicals plant. In fact Julia worked in the personnel section at the Clinic, and no doubt spent all day in the same whirl of efficiency, stabbing buttons marked 'Jones', 'Smith', and 'Brown', shunting paraplegics to the left, paranoids to the right.

She stepped into the lounge and came over to him, the standard executive product in brisk black suit and white blouse.

'Aren't you going to the school today?' she asked.

Faulkner shook his head, played with some papers on the desk. 'No, I'm still on creative reflection. Just for this week. Professor Harman thought I'd been taking too many classes and getting stale.'

She nodded, looking at him doubtfully. For three weeks now he had been lying around at home, dozing on the veranda, and she was beginning to get suspicious. Sooner or later, Faulkner realized, she would find out, but by then he hoped to be out of reach. He longed to tell her the truth, that two months ago he had resigned from his job as a lecturer at the Business School and had no intention of ever going back. She'd get a damn big surprise when she discovered they had almost expended his last pay cheque, might even have to put up with only one car. Let her work, he thought, she earns more than I did anyway.

With an effort Faulkner smiled at her. *Get out!* his mind screamed, but she still hovered around him indecisively.

'What about your lunch? There's no –'

'Don't worry about me,' Faulkner cut in quickly, watching the clock. 'I gave up eating six months ago. You have lunch at the Clinic.'

Even talking to her had become an effort. He wished they could communicate by means of notes; had even bought two scribble pads for this purpose. However, he had never quite been able to suggest that she use hers, although he did leave messages around for her, on the pretext that his mind was so intellectually engaged that talking would break up his thought trains.

Oddly enough, the idea of leaving her never seriously occurred to him. Such an escape would prove nothing. Besides, he had an alternative plan.

'You'll be all right?' she asked, still watching him warily.

'Absolutely,' Faulkner told her, maintaining the smile. It felt like a full day's work.

Her kiss was quick and functional, like the automatic peck of some huge bottle-topping machine. The smile was still on his face as she reached the door. When she had gone he let it fade slowly, then found himself breathing again and gradually relaxed, letting the tension drain down through his arms and legs. For a few minutes he wandered blankly around the empty house, then made his way into the lounge again, ready to begin his serious work.

His programme usually followed the same course. First, from the centre drawer of his desk he took a small alarm clock, fitted with a battery and wrist strap. Sitting down on the veranda, he fastened the strap to his wrist, wound and set the clock and placed it on the table next to him, binding his arm to the chair so that there was no danger of dragging the clock onto the floor.

Ready now, he lay back and surveyed the scene in front of him.

Menninger Village, or the 'Bin' as it was known locally, had been built about ten years earlier as a self-contained housing unit for the graduate staff of the Clinic and their families. In all there were some sixty houses in the development, each designed to fit into a particular architectonic niche, preserving its own identity from within and at the same time merging into the organic unity of the whole development. The object of the architects, faced with the task of compressing a great number of small houses into a four-acre site, had been, firstly, to avoid producing a collection of identical hutches, as in most housing estates, and secondly, to provide a showpiece for a major psychiatric foundation which would serve as a model for the corporate living units of the future.

However, as everyone there had found out, living in the Bin was hell on earth. The architects had employed the so-called psycho-modular system – a basic L-design – and this meant that everything under- or overlapped everything else. The whole development was a sprawl of interlocking frosted glass, white rectangles and curves, at first glance exciting and abstract (*Life* magazine had done several glossy photographic treatments of the new 'living trends' suggested by the Village) but to the people

within formless and visually exhausting. Most of the Clinic's senior staff had soon taken off, and the Village was now rented to anyone who could be persuaded to live there.

Faulkner gazed out across the veranda, separating from the clutter of white geometric shapes the eight other houses he could see without moving his head. On his left, immediately adjacent, were the Penzils, with the McPhersons on the right; the other six houses were directly ahead, on the far side of a muddle of interlocking garden areas, abstract rat-runs divided by waist-high white panelling, glass angle-pieces and slatted screens.

In the Penzils' garden was a collection of huge alphabet blocks, each three high, which their two children played with. Often they left messages out on the grass for Faulkner to read, sometimes obscene, at others merely gnomic and obscure. This morning's came into the latter category. The blocks spelled out:

STOP AND GO

Speculating on the total significance of this statement, Faulkner let his mind relax, his eyes staring blankly at the houses. Gradually their already obscured outlines began to merge and fade, and the long balconies and ramps partly hidden by the intervening trees became disembodied forms, like gigantic geometric units.

Breathing slowly, Faulkner steadily closed his mind, then without any effort erased his awareness of the identity of the house opposite.

He was now looking at a cubist landscape, a collection of random white forms below a blue backdrop, across which several powdery green blurs moved slowly backwards and forwards. Idly, he wondered what these geometric forms really represented – he knew that only a few seconds earlier they had constituted an immediately familiar part of his everyday existence – but however he rearranged them spatially in his mind, or sought their associations, they still remained a random assembly of geometric forms.

He had discovered this talent only about three weeks ago. Balefully eyeing the silent television set in the lounge one Sunday morning, he had suddenly realized that he had so completely accepted and assimilated the physical form of the plastic cabinet that he could no longer remember its function. It had required a considerable mental effort to recover himself and re-identify it. Out of interest he had tried out the new talent on other objects, found that it was particularly successful with over-associated ones such as washing machines, cars and other consumer goods. Stripped of their accretions of sales slogans and status imperatives, their real claim to reality was so tenuous that it needed little mental effort to obliterate them altogether.

The effect was similar to that of mescaline and other hallucinogens, under whose influence the dents in a cushion became as vivid as the

craters of the moon, the folds in a curtain the ripples in the waves of eternity.

During the following weeks Faulkner had experimented carefully, training his ability to operate the cut-out switches. The process was slow, but gradually he found himself able to eliminate larger and larger groups of objects, the mass-produced furniture in the lounge, the over-enamelled gadgets in the kitchen, his car in the garage – de-identified, it sat in the half-light like an enormous vegetable marrow, flaccid and gleaming; trying to identify it had driven him almost out of his mind. 'What on earth could it *possibly* be?' he had asked himself helplessly, splitting his sides with laughter – and as the facility developed he had dimly perceived that here was an escape route from the intolerable world in which he found himself at the Village.

He had described the facility to Ross Hendricks, who lived a few houses away, also a lecturer at the Business School and Faulkner's only close friend.

'I may actually be stepping out of time,' Faulkner speculated. 'Without a time sense consciousness is difficult to visualize. That is, eliminating the vector of time from the de-identified object frees it from all its everyday cognitive associations. Alternatively, I may have stumbled on a means of repressing the photo-associative centres that normally identify visual objects, in the same way that you can so listen to someone speaking your own language that none of the sounds has any meaning. Everyone's tried this at some time.'

Hendricks had nodded. 'But don't make a career out of it, though.' He eyed Faulkner carefully. 'You can't simply turn a blind eye to the world. The subject-object relationship is not as polar as Descartes' "Cogito ergo sum" suggests. By any degree to which you devalue the external world so you devalue yourself. It seems to me that your real problem is to reverse the process.'

But Hendricks, however sympathetic, was beyond helping Faulkner. Besides, it was pleasant to see the world afresh again, to wallow in an endless panorama of brilliantly coloured images. What did it matter if there was form but no content?

A sharp click woke him abruptly. He sat up with a jolt, fumbling with the alarm clock, which had been set to wake him at 11 o'clock. Looking at it, he saw that it was only 10.55. The alarm had not rung, nor had he received a shock from the battery. Yet the click had been distinct. However, there were so many servos and robots around the house that it could have been anything.

A dark shape moved across the frosted glass panel which formed the side wall of the lounge. Through it, into the narrow drive separating his house from the Penzils', he saw a car draw to a halt and park, a young woman in a blue smock climb out and walk across the gravel. This was Penzil's sister-in-law, a girl of about twenty who had been staying with

them for a couple of months. As she disappeared into the house Faulkner quickly unstrapped his wrist and stood up. Opening the veranda doors, he sauntered down into the garden, glancing back over his shoulder.

The girl, Louise (he had never spoken to her), went to sculpture classes in the morning, and on her return regularly took a leisurely shower before going out onto the roof to sunbathe.

Faulkner hung around the bottom of the garden, flipping stones into the pond and pretending to straighten some of the pergola slats, then noticed that the McPhersons' 15-year-old son Harvey was approaching along the other garden.

'Why aren't you at school?' he asked Harvey, a gangling youth with an intelligent ferretlike face under a mop of brown hair.

'I should be,' Harvey told him easily. 'But I convinced Mother I was overtense, and Morrison' – his father – 'said I was ratiocinating too much.' He shrugged. 'Patients here are overpermissive.'

'For once you're right,' Faulkner agreed, watching the shower stall over his shoulder. A pink form moved about, adjusting taps, and there was the sound of water jetting.

'Tell me, Mr Faulkner,' Harvey asked. 'Do you realize that since the death of Einstein in 1955 there hasn't been a single living genius? From Michelangelo, through Shakespeare, Newton, Beethoven, Goethe, Darwin, Freud and Einstein there's always been a living genius. Now for the first time in 500 years we're on our own.'

Faulkner nodded, his eyes engaged. 'I know,' he said. 'I feel damned lonely about it too.'

When the shower was over he grunted to Harvey, wandered back to the veranda, and took up his position again in the chair, the battery lead strapped to his wrist.

Steadily, object by object, he began to switch off the world around him. The houses opposite went first. The white masses of the roofs and balconies he resolved quickly into flat rectangles, the lines of windows into small squares of colour like the grids in a Mondrian abstract. The sky was a blank field of blue. In the distance an aircraft moved across it, engines hammering. Carefully Faulkner repressed the identity of the image, then watched the slim silver dart move slowly away like a vanishing fragment from a cartoon dream.

As he waited for the engines to fade he was conscious of the sourceless click he had heard earlier that morning. It sounded only a few feet away, near the French window on his right, but he was too immersed in the unfolding kaleidoscope to rouse himself.

When the plane had gone he turned his attention to the garden, quickly blotted out the white fencing, the fake pergola, the elliptical disc of the ornamental pool. The pathway reached out to encircle the pool, and when he blanked out his memories of the countless times he had wandered up and down its length it reared up into the air like a terracotta arm holding an enormous silver jewel.

Satisfied that he had obliterated the Village and the garden, Faulkner then began to demolish the house. Here the objects around him were more familiar, highly personalized extensions of himself. He began with the veranda furniture, transforming the tubular chairs and glass-topped table into a trio of involuted green coils, then swung his head slightly and selected the TV set inside the lounge on his right. It clung limply to its identity. Easily he unfocused his mind and reduced the brown plastic box, with its fake wooden veining, to an amorphous blur.

One by one he cleared the bookcase and desk of all associations, the standard lamps and picture frames. Like lumber in some psychological warehouse, they were suspended behind him *in vacuo*, the white armchairs and sofas like blunted rectangular clouds.

Anchored to reality only by the alarm mechanism clamped to his wrist, Faulkner craned his head from left to right, systematically obliterating all traces of meaning from the world around him, reducing everything to its formal visual values.

Gradually these too began to lose their meaning, the abstract masses of colour dissolving, drawing Faulkner after them into a world of pure psychic sensation, where blocks of ideation hung like magnetic fields in a cloud chamber . . .

With a shattering blast, the alarm rang out, the battery driving sharp spurs of pain into Faulkner's forearm. Scalp tingling, he pulled himself back into reality and clawed away the wrist strap, massaging his arm rapidly, then slapped off the alarm.

For a few minutes he sat kneading his wrist, re-identifying all the objects around him, the houses opposite, the gardens, his home, aware that a glass wall had been inserted between them and his own psyche. However carefully he focused his mind on the world outside, a screen still separated them, its opacity thickening imperceptibly.

On other levels as well, bulkheads were shifting into place.

His wife reached home at 6.00, tired out after a busy intake day, annoyed to find Faulkner ambling about in a semistupor, the veranda littered with dirty glasses.

'Well, clean it up!' she snapped when Faulkner vacated his chair for her and prepared to take off upstairs. 'Don't leave the place like this. What's the matter with you? Come on, *connect*!'

Cramming a handful of glasses together, Faulkner mumbled to himself and started for the kitchen, found Julia blocking the way out when he tried to leave. Something was on her mind. She sipped quickly at her martini, then began to throw out probes about the school. He assumed she had rung there on some pretext and had found her suspicions reinforced when she referred in passing to himself.

'Liaison is terrible,' Faulkner told her. 'Take two days off and no one remembers you work there.' By a massive effort of concentration he had managed to avoid looking his wife in the face since she arrived. In fact,

they had not exchanged a direct glance for over a week. Hopefully he wondered if this might be getting her down.

Supper was slow agony. The smells of the auto-cooked pot roast had permeated the house all afternoon. Unable to eat more than a few mouthfuls, he had nothing on which to focus his attention. Luckily Julia had a brisk appetite and he could stare at the top of her head as she ate, let his eyes wander around the room when she looked up.

After supper, thankfully, there was television. Dusk blanked out the other houses in the Village, and they sat in the darkness around the set, Julia grumbling at the programmes.

'Why do we watch *every* night?' she asked. 'It's a total time waster.'

Faulkner gestured airily. 'It's an interesting social document.' Slumped down into the wing chair, hands apparently behind his neck, he could press his fingers into his ears, at will blot out the sounds of the programme. 'Don't pay any attention to what they're saying,' he told his wife. 'It makes more sense.' He watched the characters mouthing silently like demented fish. The close-ups in melodramas were particularly hilarious; the more intense the situation the broader was the farce.

Something kicked his knee sharply. He looked up to see his wife bending over him, eyebrows knotted together, mouth working furiously. Fingers still pressed to his ears, Faulkner examined her face with detachment, for a moment speculated whether to complete the process and switch her off as he had switched off the rest of the world earlier that day. When he did he wouldn't bother to set the alarm . . .

'Harry!' he heard his wife bellow.

He sat up with a start, the row from the set backing up his wife's voice.

'What's the matter? I was asleep.'

'You were in a trance, you mean. For God's sake answer when I talk to you. I was saying that I saw Harriet Tizzard this afternoon.' Faulkner groaned and his wife swerved on him. 'I know you can't stand the Tizzards but I've decided we ought to see more of them . . .'

As his wife rattled on, Faulkner eased himself down behind the wings. When she was settled back in her chair he moved his hands up behind his neck. After a few discretionary grunts, he slid his fingers into his ears and blotted out her voice, then lay quietly watching the silent screen.

By 10 o'clock the next morning he was out on the veranda again, alarm strapped to his wrist. For the next hour he lay back enjoying the disembodied forms suspended around him, his mind free of its anxieties. When the alarm woke him at 11.00 he felt refreshed and relaxed. For a few moments he was able to survey the nearby houses with the visual curiosity their architects had intended. Gradually, however, everything began to secrete its poison again, its overlay of nagging associations, and within ten minutes he was looking fretfully at his wristwatch.

When Louise Penzil's car pulled into the drive he disconnected the alarm and sauntered out into the garden, head down to shut out as many of the surrounding houses as possible. As he was idling around the pergola, replacing the slats torn loose by the roses, Harvey McPherson suddenly popped his head over the fence.

'Harvey, are you still around? Don't you ever go to school?'

'Well, I'm on this relaxation course of Mother's,' Harvey explained. 'I find the competitive context of the classroom is –'

'I'm trying to relax too,' Faulkner cut in. 'Let's leave it at that. Why don't you beat it?'

Unruffled, Harvey pressed on. 'Mr Faulkner, I've got a sort of problem in metaphysics that's been bothering me. Maybe you could help. The only absolute in space-time is supposed to be the speed of light. But as a matter of fact any estimate of the speed of light involves the component of time, which is subjectively variable – so, bam, what's left?'

'Girls,' Faulkner said. He glanced over his shoulder at the Penzil house and then turned back moodily to Harvey.

Harvey frowned, trying to straighten his hair. 'What are you talking about?'

'Girls,' Faulkner repeated. 'You know, the weaker sex, the distaff side.'

'Oh, for Pete's sake.' Shaking his head, Harvey walked back to his house, muttering to himself.

That'll shut you up, Faulkner thought. He started to scan the Penzils' house through the slats of the pergola, then suddenly spotted Harry Penzil standing in the centre of his veranda window, frowning out at him.

Quickly Faulkner turned his back and pretended to trim the roses. By the time he managed to work his way indoors he was sweating heavily. Harry Penzil was the sort of man liable to straddle fences and come out leading with a right swing.

Mixing himself a drink in the kitchen, Faulkner brought it out onto the veranda and sat down waiting for his embarrassment to subside before setting the alarm mechanism.

He was listening carefully for any sounds from the Penzils' when he heard a familiar soft metallic click from the house on his right.

Faulkner sat forward, examining the veranda wall. This was a slab of heavy frosted glass, completely opaque, carrying white roof timbers, clipped onto which were slabs of corrugated polythene sheeting. Just beyond the veranda, screening the proximal portions of the adjacent gardens, was a ten-foot-high metal lattice extending about twenty feet down the garden fence and strung with japonica.

Inspecting the lattice carefully, Faulkner suddenly noticed the outline of a square black object on a slender tripod propped up behind the first vertical support just three feet from the open veranda window, the disc of a small glass eye staring at him unblinkingly through one of the horizontal slots.

A camera! Faulkner leapt out of his chair, gaping incredulously at the

instrument. For days it had been clicking away at him. God alone knew what glimpses into his private life Harvey had recorded for his own amusement.

Anger boiling, Faulkner strode across to the lattice, prised one of the metal members off the support beam and seized the camera. As he dragged it through the space the tripod fell away with a clatter and he heard someone on the McPhersons' veranda start up out of a chair.

Faulkner wrestled the camera through, snapping off the remote control cord attached to the shutter lever. Opening the camera, he ripped out the film, then put it down on the floor and stamped its face in with the heel of his shoe. Then, ramming the pieces together, he stepped forward and hurled them over the fence towards the far end of the McPhersons' garden.

As he returned to finish his drink the phone rang in the hall.

'Yes, what is it?' he snapped into the receiver.

'Is that you, Harry? Julia here.'

'Who?' Faulkner said, not thinking. 'Oh, yes. Well, how are things?'

'Not too good, by the sound of it.' His wife's voice had become harder. 'I've just had a long talk with Professor Harman. He told me that you resigned from the school two months ago. Harry, what are you playing at? I can hardly believe it.'

'I can hardly believe it either,' Faulkner retorted jocularly. 'It's the best news I've had for years. Thanks for confirming it.'

'Harry!' His wife was shouting now. 'Pull yourself together! If you think I'm going to support you you're very much mistaken. Professor Harman said –'

'That idiot Harman!' Faulkner interrupted. 'Don't you realize he was trying to drive me insane?' As his wife's voice rose to an hysterical squawk he held the receiver away from him, then quietly replaced it in the cradle. After a pause he took it off again and laid it down on the stack of directories.

Outside, the spring morning hung over the Village like a curtain of silence. Here and there a tree stirred in the warm air, or a window opened and caught the sunlight, but otherwise the quiet and stillness were unbroken.

Lying on the veranda, the alarm mechanism discarded on the floor below his chair, Faulkner sank deeper and deeper into his private reverie, into the demolished world of form and colour which hung motionlessly around him. The houses opposite had vanished, their places taken by long white rectangular bands. The garden was a green ramp at the end of which poised the silver ellipse of the pond. The veranda was a transparent cube, in the centre of which he felt himself suspended like an image floating on a sea of ideation. He had obliterated not only the world around him, but his own body, and his limbs and trunk seemed an extension of his

mind, disembodied forms whose physical dimensions pressed upon it like a dream's awareness of its own identity.

Some hours later, as he rotated slowly through his reverie, he was aware of a sudden intrusion into his field of vision. Focusing his eyes, with surprise he saw the dark-suited figure of his wife standing in front of him, shouting angrily and gesturing with her handbag.

For a few minutes Faulkner examined the discrete entity she familiarly presented, the proportions of her legs and arms, the planes of her face. Then, without moving, he began to dismantle her mentally, obliterating her literally limb by limb. First he forgot her hands, forever snapping and twisting like frenzied birds, then her arms and shoulders, erasing all his memories of their energy and motion. Finally, as it pressed closer to him, mouth working wildly, he forgot her face, so that it presented nothing more than a blunted wedge of pink-grey dough, deformed by various ridges and grooves, split by apertures that opened and closed like the vents of some curious bellows.

Turning back to the silent dreamscape, he was aware of her jostling insistently behind him. Her presence seemed ugly and formless, a bundle of obtrusive angles.

Then at last they came into brief physical contact. Gesturing her away, he felt her fasten like a dog upon his arm. He tried to shake her off but she clung to him, jerking about in an outpouring of anger.

Her rhythms were sharp and ungainly. To begin with he tried to ignore them; then he began to restrain and smooth her, moulding her angular form into a softer and rounder one.

As he worked away, kneading her like a sculptor shaping clay, he noticed a series of crackling noises, over which a persistent scream was just barely audible. When he finished he let her fall to the floor, a softly squeaking lump of spongy rubber.

Faulkner returned to his reverie, re-assimilating the unaltered landscape. His brush with his wife had reminded him of the one encumbrance that still remained – his own body. Although he had forgotten its identity it none the less felt heavy and warm, vaguely uncomfortable, like a badly made bed to a restless sleeper. What he sought was pure ideation, the undisturbed sensation of psychic being untransmuted by any physical medium. Only thus could he escape the nausea of the external world.

Somewhere in his mind an idea suggested itself. Rising from his chair, he walked out across the veranda, unaware of the physical movements involved, but propelling himself towards the far end of the garden.

Hidden by the rose pergola, he stood for five minutes at the edge of the pond, then stepped into the water. Trousers billowing around his knees, he waded out slowly. When he reached the centre he sat down, pushing the weeds apart, and lay back in the shallow water.

Slowly he felt the puttylike mass of his body dissolving, its temperature growing cooler and less oppressive. Looking out through the surface of the water six inches above his face, he watched the blue disc of the

sky, cloudless and undisturbed, expanding to fill his consciousness. At last he had found the perfect background, the only possible field of ideation, an absolute continuum of existence uncontaminated by material excrescences.

Steadily watching it, he waited for the world to dissolve and set him free.

1961

MR F. IS MR F.

And baby makes three.

. . . Eleven o'clock. Hanson should have reached here by now. Elizabeth! Damn, why does she always move so quietly?

Climbing down from the window overlooking the road, Freeman ran back to his bed and jumped in, smoothing the blankets over his knees. As his wife poked her head around the door he smiled up at her guilelessly, pretending to read a magazine.

'Everything all right?' she asked, eyeing him shrewdly. She moved her matronly bulk towards him and began to straighten the bed. Freeman fidgeted irritably, pushing her away when she tried to lift him off the pillow on which he was sitting.

'For heaven's sake, Elizabeth, I'm not a child!' he remonstrated, controlling his sing-song voice with difficulty.

'What's happened to Hanson? He was supposed to be here half an hour ago.'

His wife shook her large handsome head and went over to the window. The loose cotton dress disguised her figure, but as she reached up to the bolt Freeman could see the incipient swell of her pregnancy.

'He must have missed his train.' With a single twist of her forearm she securely fastened the upper bolt, which had taken Freeman ten minutes to unlatch.

'I thought I could hear it banging,' she said pointedly. 'We don't want you to catch a cold, do we?'

Freeman waited impatiently for her to leave, glancing at his watch. When his wife paused at the foot of the bed, surveying him carefully, he could barely restrain himself from shouting at her.

'I'm getting the baby's clothes together,' she said, adding aloud to herself, 'which reminds me, you need a new dressing gown. That old one of yours is losing its shape.'

Freeman pulled the lapels of the dressing gown across each other, as much to hide his bare chest as to fill out the gown.

'Elizabeth, I've had this for years and it's perfectly good. You're getting an obsession about renewing everything.' He hesitated, realizing the tactlessness of this remark – he should be flattered that she was identifying him with the expected baby. If the strength of the identification was sometimes alarming, this was probably because she was

having her first child at a comparatively late age, in her early forties. Besides, he had been ill and bed-ridden during the past month (and what were *his* unconscious motives?) which only served to reinforce the confusion.

'Elizabeth. I'm sorry. It's been good of you to look after me. Perhaps we should call a doctor.'

No! something screamed inside him.

As if hearing this, his wife shook her head in agreement.

'You'll be all right soon. Let nature take its proper course. I don't think you need to see the doctor yet.'

Yet?

Freeman listened to her feet disappearing down the carpeted staircase. A few minutes later the sound of the washing machine drummed out from the kitchen.

Yet!

Freeman slipped quickly out of bed and went into the bathroom.

The cupboard beside the wash-basin was crammed with drying baby clothes, which Elizabeth had either bought or knitted, then carefully washed and sterilized. On each of the five shelves a large square of gauze covered the neat piles, but he could see that most of the clothes were blue, a few white and none pink.

I hope Elizabeth is right, he thought. *If she is it's certainly going to be the world's best-dressed baby. We're supporting an industry single-handed.*

He bent down to the bottom compartment, and from below the tank pulled out a small set of scales. On the shelf immediately above he noticed a large brown garment, a six-year-old's one-piece romper suit. Next to it was a set of vests, outsize, almost big enough to fit Freeman himself. He stripped off his dressing gown and stepped on to the platform. In the mirror behind the door he examined his small hairless body, with its thin shoulders and narrow hips, long coltish legs.

Six stone nine pounds yesterday. Averting his eyes from the dial, he listened to the washing machine below, then waited for the pointer to steady.

'Six stone two pounds!'

Fumbling with his dressing gown, Freeman pushed the scales under the tank.

Six stone two pounds! A drop of seven pounds in twenty-four hours!

He hurried back into bed, and sat there trembling nervously, fingering for his vanished moustache.

Yet only two months ago he had weighed over eleven stone. Seven pounds in a single day, at this rate –

His mind baulked at the conclusion. Trying to steady his knees, he reached for one of the magazines, turned the pages blindly.

And baby makes two.

* * *

He had first become aware of the transformation six weeks earlier, almost immediately after Elizabeth's pregnancy had been confirmed.

Shaving the next morning in the bathroom before going to the office, he discovered that his moustache was thinning. The usually stiff black bristles were soft and flexible, taking on their former ruddy-brown colouring.

His beard, too, was lighter; normally dark and heavy after only a few hours, it yielded before the first few strokes of the razor, leaving his face pink and soft.

Freeman had credited this apparent rejuvenation to the appearance of the baby. He was forty when he married Elizabeth, two or three years her junior, and had assumed unconsciously that he was too old to become a parent, particularly as he had deliberately selected Elizabeth as an ideal mother-substitute, and saw himself as her child rather than as her parental partner. However, now that a child had actually materialized he felt no resentment towards it. Complimenting himself, he decided that he had entered a new phase of maturity and could whole-heartedly throw himself into the role of young parent.

Hence the disappearing moustache, the fading beard, the youthful spring in his step. He crooned:

'Just Lizzie and me,
And baby makes three.'

Behind him, in the mirror, he watched Elizabeth still asleep, her large hips filling the bed. He was glad to see her rest. Contrary to what he had expected, she was even more concerned with him than with the baby, refusing to allow him to prepare his own breakfast. As he brushed his hair, a rich blond growth, sweeping back off his forehead to cover his bald dome, he reflected wryly on the time-honoured saws in the maternity books about the hypersensitivity of expectant fathers – evidently Elizabeth took these counsels seriously.

He tiptoed back into the bedroom and stood by the open window, basking in the crisp early morning air. Downstairs, while he waited for breakfast, he pulled his old tennis racquet out of the hall cupboard, finally woke Elizabeth when one of his practice strokes cracked the glass in the barometer.

To begin with Freeman had revelled in his new-found energy. He took Elizabeth boating, rowing her furiously up and down the river, rediscovering all the physical pleasures he had been too preoccupied to enjoy in his early twenties. He would go shopping with Elizabeth, steering her smoothly along the pavement, carrying all her baby purchases, shoulders back, feeling ten feet tall.

However, it was here that he had his first inkling of what was really happening.

Elizabeth was a large woman, attractive in her way, with broad shoulders and strong hips, and accustomed to wearing high heels. Freeman, a stocky

man of medium height, had always been slightly shorter than her, but this had never worried him.

When he found that he barely reached above her shoulder he began to examine himself more closely.

On one of their shopping expeditions (Elizabeth always took Freeman with her, unselfishly asked his opinions, what he preferred, almost as if *he* would be wearing the tiny matinee coats and dresses) a saleswoman unwittingly referred to Elizabeth as his 'mother'. Jolted, Freeman had recognized the obvious disparity between them – the pregnancy was making Elizabeth's face puffy, filling out her neck and shoulders, while his own features were smooth and unlined.

When they reached home he wandered around the lounge and dining room, realized that the furniture and bookshelves seemed larger and more bulky. Upstairs in the bathroom he climbed on the scales for the first time, found that he had lost one stone six pounds in weight.

Undressing that night, he made another curious discovery.

Elizabeth was taking in the seams of his jackets and trousers. She had said nothing to him about this, and when he saw her sewing away over her needle basket he had assumed she was preparing something for the baby.

During the next days his first flush of spring vigour faded. Strange changes were taking place in his body – his skin and hair, his entire musculature, seemed transformed. The planes of his face had altered, the jaw was trimmer, the nose less prominent, cheeks smooth and unblemished.

Examining his mouth in the mirror, he found that most of his old metal fillings had vanished, firm white enamel taking their place.

He continued to go to the office, conscious of the stares of his colleagues around him. The day after he found he could no longer reach the reference books on the shelf behind his desk he stayed at home, feigning an attack of influenza.

Elizabeth seemed to understand completely. Freeman had said nothing to her, afraid that she might be terrified into a miscarriage if she learned the truth. Swathed in his old dressing gown, a woollen scarf around his neck and chest to make his slim figure appear more bulky, he sat on the sofa in the lounge, blankets piled across him, a firm cushion raising him higher off the seat.

Carefully he tried to avoid standing whenever Elizabeth was in the room, and when absolutely necessary circled behind the furniture on tiptoe.

A week later, however, when his feet no longer touched the floor below the dining-room table, he decided to remain in his bed upstairs.

Elizabeth agreed readily. All the while she watched her husband with her bland impassive eyes, quietly readying herself for the baby.

Damn Hanson, Freeman thought. At eleven forty-five he had still not appeared. Freeman flipped through the magazine without looking at it,

glancing irritably at his watch every few seconds. The strap was now too large for his wrist and twice he had prised additional holes for the clasp.

How to describe his metamorphosis to Hanson he had not decided, plagued as he was by curious doubts. He was not even sure what *was* happening. Certainly he had lost a remarkable amount of weight – up to eight or nine pounds each day – and almost a foot in height, but without any accompanying loss of health. He had, in fact, reverted to the age and physique of a fourteen-year-old schoolboy.

But what was the real explanation? Freeman asked himself. Was the rejuvenation some sort of psychosomatic excess? Although he felt no conscious animosity towards the expected baby, was he in the grip of an insane attempt at retaliation?

It was this possibility, with its logical prospect of padded cells and white-coated guards, that had frightened Freeman into silence. Elizabeth's doctor was brusque and unsympathetic, and almost certainly would regard Freeman as a neurotic malingerer, perpetrating an elaborate charade designed to substitute himself for his own child in his wife's affections.

Also, Freeman knew, there were other motives, obscure and intangible. Frightened of examining them, he began to read the magazine.

It was a schoolchild's comic. Annoyed, Freeman stared at the cover, then looked at the stack of magazines which Elizabeth had ordered from the newsagent that morning. They were all the same.

His wife entered her bedroom on the other side of the landing. Freeman slept alone now in what would eventually be the baby's nursery, partly to give himself enough privacy to think, and also to save him the embarrassment of revealing his shrinking body to his wife.

She came in, carrying a small tray on which were a glass of warm milk and two biscuits. Although he was losing weight, Freeman had the eager appetite of a child. He took the biscuits and ate them hurriedly.

Elizabeth sat on the bed, producing a brochure from the pocket of her apron.

'I want to order the baby's cot,' she told him. 'Would you like to choose one of the designs?'

Freeman waved airily. 'Any of them will do. Pick one that's strong and heavy, something he won't be able to climb out of too easily.'

His wife nodded, watching him pensively. All afternoon she spent ironing and cleaning, moving the piles of dry linen into the cupboards on the landing, disinfecting pails and buckets.

They had decided she would have the baby at home.

Four and a half stone!

Freeman gasped at the dial below his feet. During the previous two days he had lost over one stone six pounds, had barely been able to reach up to the handle of the cupboard and open the door. Trying not to look at himself in the mirror, he realized he was now the size of a six-year-old,

with a slim chest, slender neck and face. The skirt of the dressing gown trailed across the floor behind him, and only with difficulty could he keep his arms through the voluminous sleeves.

When Elizabeth came up with his breakfast she examined him critically, put the tray down and went out to one of the landing cupboards. She returned with a small sports-shirt and a pair of corduroy shorts.

'Would you like to wear these, dear?' she asked. 'You'll find them more comfortable.'

Reluctant to use his voice, which had degenerated into a piping treble, Freeman shook his head. After she had gone, however, he pulled off the heavy dressing gown and put on the garments.

Suppressing his doubts, he wondered how to reach the doctor without having to go downstairs to the telephone. So far he had managed to avoid raising his wife's suspicions, but now there was no hope of continuing to do so. He barely reached up to her waist. If she saw him standing upright she might well die of shock on the spot.

Fortunately, Elizabeth left him alone. Once, just after lunch, two men arrived in a van from the department store and delivered a blue cot and play-pen, but he pretended to be asleep until they had gone. Despite his anxiety, Freeman easily fell asleep – he had begun to feel tired after lunch – and woke two hours later to find that Elizabeth had made the bed in the cot, swathing the blue blankets and pillow in a plastic sheet.

Below this, shackled to the wooden sides, he could see the white leather straps of a restraining harness.

The next morning Freeman decided to escape. His weight was down to only three stone one pound, and the clothes Elizabeth had given him the previous day were already three sizes too large, the trousers supporting themselves precariously around his slender waist. In the bathroom mirror Freeman stared at the small boy, watching him with wide eyes. Dimly he remembered snapshots of his own childhood.

After breakfast, when Elizabeth was out in the garden, he crept downstairs. Through the window he saw her open the dustbin and push inside his business suit and black leather shoes.

Freeman waited helplessly for a moment, and then hurried back to his room. Striding up the huge steps required more effort than he imagined, and by the time he reached the top flight he was too exhausted to climb on to the bed. Panting, he leaned against it for a few minutes. Even if he reached the hospital, how could he convince anyone there of what had happened without having to call Elizabeth along to identify him?

Fortunately, his intelligence was still intact. Given a pencil and paper he would soon demonstrate his adult mind, a circumstantial knowledge of social affairs that no infant prodigy could ever possess.

His first task was to reach the hospital or, failing that, the local police station. Luckily, all he needed to do was walk along the nearest main

thoroughfare – a four-year-old child wandering about on his own would soon be picked up by a constable on duty.

Below, he heard Elizabeth come slowly up the stairs, the laundry basket creaking under her arm. Freeman tried to lift himself on to the bed, but only succeeded in disarranging the sheets. As Elizabeth opened the door he ran around to the far side of the bed and hid his tiny body behind it, resting his chin on the bedspread.

Elizabeth paused, watching his small plump face. For a moment they gazed at each other, Freeman's heart pounding, wondering how she could fail to realize what had happened to him. But she merely smiled and walked through into the bathroom.

Supporting himself on the bedside table, he climbed in, his face away from the bathroom door. On her way out Elizabeth bent down and tucked him up, then slipped out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

The rest of the day Freeman waited for an opportunity to escape, but his wife was busy upstairs, and early that evening, before he could prevent himself, he fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

He woke in a vast white room. Blue light dappled the high walls, along which a line of giant animal figures danced and gambolled. Looking around, he realized that he was still in the nursery. He was wearing a small pair of polka-dot pyjamas (had Elizabeth changed him while he slept?) but they were almost too large for his shrunken arms and legs.

A miniature dressing gown had been laid out across the foot of the bed, a pair of slippers on the floor. Freeman climbed down from the bed and put them on, his balance unsteady. The door was closed, but he pulled a chair over and stood on it, turning the handle with his two small fists.

On the landing he paused, listening carefully. Elizabeth was in the kitchen, humming to herself. One step at a time, Freeman moved down the staircase, watching his wife through the rail. She was standing over the cooker, her broad back almost hiding the machine, warming some milk gruel. Freeman waited until she turned to the sink, then ran across the hall into the lounge and out through the french windows.

The thick soles of his carpet slippers muffled his footsteps, and he broke into a run once he reached the shelter of the front garden. The gate was almost too stiff for him to open, and as he fumbled with the latch a middle-aged woman stopped and peered down at him, frowning at the windows.

Freeman pretended to run back into the house, hoping that Elizabeth had not yet discovered his disappearance. When the woman moved off, he opened the gate, and hurried down the street towards the shopping centre.

He had entered an enormous world. The two-storey houses loomed like canyon walls, the end of the street one hundred yards away below the horizon. The paving stones were massive and uneven, the tall sycamores as distant as the sky. A car came towards him, daylight between its wheels, hesitated and sped on.

He was still fifty yards from the corner when he tripped over one of the pavement stones and was forced to stop. Out of breath, he leaned against a tree, his legs exhausted.

He heard a gate open, and over his shoulder saw Elizabeth glance up and down the street. Quickly he stepped behind the tree, waited until she returned to the house, and then set off again.

Suddenly, sweeping down from the sky, a vast arm lifted him off his feet. Gasping with surprise, he looked up into the face of Mr Symonds, his bank manager.

'You're out early, young man,' Symonds said. He put Freeman down, holding him tightly by one hand. His car was parked in the drive next to them. Leaving the engine running, he began to walk Freeman back down the street. 'Now, let's see, where do you live?'

Freeman tried to pull himself away, jerking his arm furiously, but Symonds hardly noticed his efforts. Elizabeth stepped out of the gate, an apron around her waist, and hurried towards them. Freeman tried to hide between Symonds' legs, felt himself picked up in the bank manager's strong arms and handed to Elizabeth. She held him firmly, his head over her broad shoulder, thanked Symonds and carried him back into the house.

As they crossed the pathway Freeman hung limply, trying to will himself out of existence.

In the nursery he waited for his feet to touch the bed, ready to dive below the blankets, but instead Elizabeth lowered him carefully to the floor, and he discovered he had been placed in the baby's play-pen. He held the rail uncertainly, while Elizabeth bent over and straightened his dressing gown. Then, to Freeman's relief, she turned away.

For five minutes Freeman stood numbly by the rail, outwardly recovering his breath, but at the same time gradually realizing something of which he had been dimly afraid for several days – by an extraordinary inversion of logic, Elizabeth identified him with the baby inside her womb! Far from showing surprise at Freeman's transformation into a three-year-old child, his wife merely accepted this as a natural concomitant of her own pregnancy. In her mind she had externalized the child within her. As Freeman shrank progressively smaller, mirroring the growth of her child, her eyes were fixed on their common focus, and all she could see was the image of her baby.

Still searching for a means of escape, Freeman discovered that he was unable to climb out of the play-pen. The light wooden bars were too strong for his small arms to break, the whole cage too heavy to lift. Exhausting himself, he sat down on the floor, and fiddled nervously with a large coloured ball.

Instead of trying to evade Elizabeth and hide his transformation from her, he realized that he must now attract her attention and force her to recognize his real identity.

Standing up, he began to rock the play-pen from side to side, edging it across to the wall where the sharp corner set up a steady battering.

Elizabeth came out of her bedroom.

'Now, darling, what's all the noise for?' she asked, smiling at him. 'How about a biscuit?' She knelt down by the pen, her face only a few inches from Freeman's.

Screwing up his courage, Freeman looked straight at her, searching the large, unblinking eyes. He took the biscuit, cleared his throat and said carefully: 'I'd nod blor aby.'

Elizabeth ruffled his long blond hair. 'Aren't you, darling? What a sad shame.'

Freeman stamped his foot, then flexed his lips. 'I'd nod blor aby!' he shouted. 'I'd blor usban!'

Laughing to herself, Elizabeth began to empty the wardrobe beside the bed. As Freeman remonstrated with her, struggling helplessly with the strings of consonants, she took out his dinner jacket and overcoat. Then she emptied the chest of drawers, lifting out his shirts and socks, and wrapped them away inside a sheet.

After she had carried everything out she returned and stripped the bed, pushed it back against the wall, putting the baby cot in its place.

Clutching the rail of the play-pen, Freeman watched dumbfounded as the last remnants of his former existence were dispatched below.

'Lisbeg, lep me, I'd –!'

He gave up, searched the floor of the play-pen for something to write with. Summoning his energies, he rocked the cot over to the wall, and in large letters, using the spit which flowed amply from his mouth, wrote:

ELIZABETH HELP ME! I AM NOT A BABY

Banging on the door with his fists, he finally attracted Elizabeth's attention, but when he pointed to the wall the marks had dried. Weeping with frustration, Freeman toddled across the cage and began to retrace the message. Before he had completed more than two or three letters Elizabeth put her arms around his waist and lifted him out.

A single place had been set at the head of the dining-room table, a new high chair beside it. Still trying to form a coherent sentence, Freeman felt himself rammed into the seat, a large bib tied around his neck.

During the meal he watched Elizabeth carefully, hoping to detect in her motionless face some inkling of recognition, even a fleeting awareness that the two-year-old child sitting in front of her was her husband. Freeman played with his food, smearing crude messages on the tray around his dish, but when he pointed at them Elizabeth clapped her hands, apparently joining in his little triumphs, and then wiped the tray clean. Worn out, Freeman let himself be carried upstairs, lay strapped in the cot under the miniature blankets.

Time was against him. By now, he found, he was asleep for the greater portion of each day. For the first hours he felt fresh and alert, but his energy faded rapidly and after each meal an overwhelming lethargy

closed his eyes like a sleeping draught. Dimly he was aware that his metamorphosis continued unchecked – when he woke he could sit up only with difficulty. The effort of standing upright on his buckling legs tired him after a few minutes.

His power of speech had vanished. All he could produce were a few grotesque grunts, or an inarticulate babble. Lying on his back with a bottle of hot milk in his mouth, he knew that his one hope was Hanson. Sooner or later he would call in and discover that Freeman had disappeared and all traces of him had been carefully removed.

Propped against a cushion on the carpet in the lounge, Freeman noted that Elizabeth had emptied his desk and taken down his books from the shelves beside the fireplace. To all intents she was now the widowed mother of a twelve-month-old son, parted from her husband since their honeymoon.

Unconsciously she had begun to assume this role. When they went out for their morning walks, Freeman strapped back into the pram, a celluloid rabbit rattling a few inches from his nose and almost driving him insane, they passed many people he had known by sight, and all took it for granted that he was Elizabeth's son. As they bent over the pram, poking him in the stomach and complimenting Elizabeth on his size and precosity, several of them referred to her husband, and Elizabeth replied that he was away on an extended trip. In her mind, obviously, she had already dismissed Freeman, forgetting that he had ever existed.

He realized how wrong he was when they returned from what was to be his last outing.

As they neared home Elizabeth hesitated slightly, jolting the pram, apparently uncertain whether to retrace her steps. Someone shouted at them from the distance, and as Freeman tried to identify the familiar voice Elizabeth bent forwards and pulled the hood over his head.

Struggling to free himself, Freeman recognized the tall figure of Hanson towering over the pram, doffing his hat.

'Mrs Freeman, I've been trying to ring you all week. How are you?'

'Very well, Mr Hanson.' She jerked the pram around, trying to keep it between herself and Hanson. Freeman could see that she was momentarily confused. 'I'm afraid our telephone is out of order.'

Hanson side-stepped around the pram, watching Elizabeth with interest. 'What happened to Charles on Saturday? Have to go off on business?'

Elizabeth nodded. 'He was very sorry, Mr Hanson, but something important came up. He'll be away for some time.'

She knew, Freeman said automatically to himself.

Hanson peered under the hood at Freeman. 'Out for a morning stroll, little chap?' To Elizabeth he commented: 'Fine baby there. I always like the angry-looking ones. Your neighbour's?'

Elizabeth shook her head. 'The son of a friend of Charles's. We must be getting along, Mr Hanson.'

'Do call me Robert. See you again soon, eh?'

Elizabeth smiled, her face composed again. 'I'm sure we will, Robert.'

'Good show.' With a roguish grin, Hanson walked off.

She knew!

Astounded, Freeman pushed the blankets back as far as he could, watching Hanson's retreating figure. He turned once to wave to Elizabeth, who raised her hand and then steered the pram through the gate.

Freeman tried to sit up, his eyes fixed on Elizabeth, hoping she would see the anger in his face. But she wheeled the pram swiftly into the passageway, unfastened the straps and lifted Freeman out.

As they went up the staircase he looked down over her shoulder at the telephone, saw that the receiver was off its cradle. All along she had known what was happening, had deliberately pretended not to notice his metamorphosis. She had anticipated each stage of the transformation, the comprehensive wardrobe had been purchased well in advance, the succession of smaller and smaller garments, the play-pen and cot, had been ordered for him, not for the baby.

For a moment Freeman wondered whether she was pregnant at all. The facial puffiness, the broadening figure, might well have been illusory. When she told him she was expecting a baby he had never imagined that *he* would be the baby.

Handling him roughly, she bundled Freeman into his cot and secured him under the blankets. Downstairs he could hear her moving about rapidly, apparently preparing for some emergency. Propelled by an uncharacteristic urgency, she was closing the windows and doors. As he listened to her, Freeman noticed how cold he felt. His small body was swaddled like a new-born infant in a mass of shawls, but his bones were like sticks of ice. A curious drowsiness was coming over him, draining away his anger and fear, and the centre of his awareness was shifting from his eyes to his skin. The thin afternoon light stung his eyes, and as they closed he slipped off into a blurring limbo of shallow sleep, the tender surface of his body aching for relief.

Some while later he felt Elizabeth's hands pull away the blankets, and was aware of her carrying him across the hallway. Gradually his memory of the house and his own identity began to fade, and his shrinking body clung helplessly to Elizabeth as she lay on her broad bed.

Hating the naked hair that rasped across his face, he now felt clearly for the first time what he had for so long repressed. Before the end he cried out suddenly with joy and wonder, as he remembered the drowned world of his first childhood.

As the child within her quietened, stirring for the last time, Elizabeth sank back on to the pillow, the birth pains slowly receding. Gradually she felt her strength return, the vast world within her settling and annealing itself. Staring at the darkened ceiling, she lay resting for several hours, now and then adjusting her large figure to fit the unfamiliar contours of the bed.

The next morning she rose for half an hour. The child already seemed less burdensome, and three days later she was able to leave her bed completely, a loose smock hiding what remained of her pregnancy. Immediately she began the last task, clearing away all that remained of the baby's clothing, dismantling the cot and play-pen. The clothing she tied into large parcels, then telephoned a local charity which came and collected them. The pram and cot she sold to the second-hand dealer who drove down the street. Within two days she had erased every trace of her husband, stripping the coloured illustrations from the nursery walls and replacing the spare bed in the centre of the floor.

All that remained was the diminishing knot within her, a small clenching fist. When she could almost no longer feel it Elizabeth went to her jewel box and took off her wedding ring.

On her return from the shopping centre the next morning, Elizabeth noticed someone hailing her from a car parked outside her gate.

'Mrs Freeman!' Hanson jumped out of the car and accosted her gaily. 'It's wonderful to see you looking so well.'

Elizabeth gave him a wide heart-warming smile, her handsome face made more sensual by the tumescence of her features. She was wearing a bright silk dress and all visible traces of the pregnancy had vanished.

'Where's Charles?' Hanson asked. 'Still away?'

Elizabeth's smile broadened, her lips parted across her strong white teeth. Her face was curiously expressionless, her eyes momentarily fixed on some horizon far beyond Hanson's face.

Hanson waited uncertainly for Elizabeth to reply. Then, taking the hint, he leaned back into his car and switched off the engine. He rejoined Elizabeth, holding the gate open for her.

So Elizabeth met her husband. Three hours later the metamorphosis of Charles Freeman reached its climax. In that last second Freeman came to his true beginning, the moment of his conception coinciding with the moment of his extinction, the end of his last birth with the beginning of his first death.

And baby makes one.

1961

BILLENNIUM

All day long, and often into the early hours of the morning, the tramp of feet sounded up and down the stairs outside Ward's cubicle. Built into a narrow alcove in a bend of the staircase between the fourth and fifth floors, its plywood walls flexed and creaked with every footstep like the timbers of a rotting windmill. Over a hundred people lived in the top three floors of the old rooming house, and sometimes Ward would lie awake on his narrow bunk until 2 or 3 a.m., mechanically counting the last residents returning from the all-night movies in the stadium half a mile away. Through the window he could hear giant fragments of the amplified dialogue booming among the rooftops. The stadium was never empty. During the day the huge four-sided screen was raised on its davit and athletics meetings or football matches ran continuously. For the people in the houses abutting the stadium the noise must have been unbearable.

Ward, at least, had a certain degree of privacy. Two months earlier, before he came to live on the staircase, he had shared a room with seven others on the ground floor of a house in 755th Street, and the ceaseless press of people jostling past the window had reduced him to a state of exhaustion. The street was always full, an endless clamour of voices and shuffling feet. By 6.30, when he woke, hurrying to take his place in the bathroom queue, the crowds already jammed it from sidewalk to sidewalk, the din punctuated every half minute by the roar of the elevated trains running over the shops on the opposite side of the road. As soon as he saw the advertisement describing the staircase cubicle he had left (like everyone else, he spent most of his spare time scanning the classifieds in the newspapers, moving his lodgings an average of once every two months) despite the higher rental. A cubicle on a staircase would almost certainly be on its own.

However, this had its drawbacks. Most evenings his friends from the library would call in, eager to rest their elbows after the bruising crush of the public reading room. The cubicle was slightly more than four and a half square metres in floor area, half a square metre over the statutory maximum for a single person, the carpenters having taken advantage, illegally, of a recess beside a nearby chimney breast. Consequently Ward had been able to fit a small straight-backed chair into the interval between the bed and the door, so that only one person at a time needed to sit on the bed – in most single cubicles host and guest had to sit side by side on the

bed, conversing over their shoulders and changing places periodically to avoid neck-strain.

'You were lucky to find this place,' Rossiter, the most regular visitor, never tired of telling him. He reclined back on the bed, gesturing at the cubicle. 'It's enormous, the perspectives really zoom. I'd be surprised if you haven't got at least five metres here, perhaps six.'

Ward shook his head categorically. Rossiter was his closest friend, but the quest for living space had forged powerful reflexes. 'Just over four and a half, I've measured it carefully. There's no doubt about it.'

Rossiter lifted one eyebrow. 'I'm amazed. It must be the ceiling then.'

Manipulating the ceiling was a favourite trick of unscrupulous landlords – most assessments of area were made upon the ceiling, out of convenience, and by tilting back the plywood partitions the rated area of a cubicle could be either increased, for the benefit of a prospective tenant (many married couples were thus bamboozled into taking a single cubicle), or decreased temporarily on the visits of the housing inspectors. Ceilings were criss-crossed with pencil marks staking out the rival claims of tenants on opposite sides of a party wall. Someone timid of his rights could be literally squeezed out of existence – in fact, the advertisement 'quiet clientele' was usually a tacit invitation to this sort of piracy.

'The wall does tilt a little,' Ward admitted. 'Actually, it's about four degrees out – I used a plumb-line. But there's still plenty of room on the stairs for people to get by.'

Rossiter grinned. 'Of course, John. I'm just envious, that's all. My room is driving me crazy.' Like everyone, he used the term 'room' to describe his tiny cubicle, a hangover from the days fifty years earlier when people had indeed lived one to a room, sometimes, unbelievably, one to an apartment or house. The microfilms in the architecture catalogues at the library showed scenes of museums, concert halls and other public buildings in what appeared to be everyday settings, often virtually empty, two or three people wandering down an enormous gallery or staircase. Traffic moved freely along the centre of streets, and in the quieter districts sections of sidewalk would be deserted for fifty yards or more.

Now, of course, the older buildings had been torn down and replaced by housing batteries, or converted into apartment blocks. The great banqueting room in the former City Hall had been split horizontally into four decks, each of these cut up into hundreds of cubicles.

As for the streets, traffic had long since ceased to move about them. Apart from a few hours before dawn when only the sidewalks were crowded, every thoroughfare was always packed with a shuffling mob of pedestrians, perforce ignoring the countless 'Keep Left' signs suspended over their heads, wrestling past each other on their way to home and office, their clothes dusty and shapeless. Often 'locks' would occur when a huge crowd at a street junction became immovably jammed. Sometimes these locks would last for days. Two years earlier Ward had been caught

in one outside the stadium, for over forty-eight hours was trapped in a gigantic pedestrian jam containing over 20,000 people, fed by the crowds leaving the stadium on one side and those approaching it on the other. An entire square mile of the local neighbourhood had been paralysed, and he vividly remembered the nightmare of swaying helplessly on his feet as the jam shifted and heaved, terrified of losing his balance and being trampled underfoot. When the police had finally sealed off the stadium and dispersed the jam he had gone back to his cubicle and slept for a week, his body blue with bruises.

'I hear they may reduce the allocation to three and a half metres,' Rossiter remarked.

Ward paused to allow a party of tenants from the sixth floor to pass down the staircase, holding the door to prevent it jumping off its latch. 'So they're always saying,' he commented. 'I can remember that rumour ten years ago.'

'It's no rumour,' Rossiter warned him. 'It may well be necessary soon. Thirty million people are packed into this city now, a million increase in just one year. There's been some pretty serious talk at the Housing Department.'

Ward shook his head. 'A drastic revaluation like that is almost impossible to carry out. Every single partition would have to be dismantled and nailed up again, the administrative job alone is so vast it's difficult to visualize. Millions of cubicles to be redesigned and certified, licences to be issued, plus the complete resettlement of every tenant. Most of the buildings put up since the last revaluation are designed around a four-metre modulus – you can't simply take half a metre off the end of each cubicle and then say that makes so many new cubicles. They may be only six inches wide.' He laughed. 'Besides, how can you live in just three and a half metres?'

Rossiter smiled. 'That's the ultimate argument, isn't it? They used it twenty-five years ago at the last revaluation, when the minimum was cut from five to four. It couldn't be done they all said, no one could stand living in only four square metres, it was enough room for a bed and suitcase, but you couldn't open the door to get in.' Rossiter chuckled softly. 'They were all wrong. It was merely decided that from then on all doors would open outwards. Four square metres was here to stay.'

Ward looked at his watch. It was 7.30. 'Time to eat. Let's see if we can get into the food-bar across the road.'

Grumbling at the prospect, Rossiter pulled himself off the bed. They left the cubicle and made their way down the staircase. This was crammed with luggage and packing cases so that only a narrow interval remained around the banister. On the floors below the congestion was worse. Corridors were wide enough to be chopped up into single cubicles, and the air was stale and dead, cardboard walls hung with damp laundry and makeshift larders. Each of the five rooms on the floors contained a dozen tenants, their voices reverberating through the partitions.

People were sitting on the steps above the second floor, using the staircase as an informal lounge, although this was against the fire regulations, women talking to the men queueing in their shirtsleeves outside the washroom, children diving around them. By the time they reached the entrance Ward and Rossiter were having to force their way through the tenants packed together on every landing, loitering around the notice boards or pushing in from the street below.

Taking a breath at the top of the steps, Ward pointed to the food-bar on the other side of the road. It was only thirty yards away, but the throng moving down the street swept past like a river at full tide, crossing them from right to left. The first picture show at the stadium started at 9 o'clock, and people were setting off already to make sure of getting in.

'Can't we go somewhere else?' Rossiter asked, screwing his face up at the prospect of the food-bar. Not only was it packed and take them half an hour to be served, but the food was flat and unappetizing. The journey from the library four blocks away had given him an appetite.

Ward shrugged. 'There's a place on the corner, but I doubt if we can make it.' This was two hundred yards upstream; they would be fighting the crowd all the way.

'Maybe you're right.' Rossiter put his hand on Ward's shoulder. 'You know, John, your trouble is that you never go anywhere, you're too disengaged, you just don't realize how bad everything is getting.'

Ward nodded. Rossiter was right. In the morning, when he set off for the library, the pedestrian traffic was moving with him towards the down-town offices; in the evening, when he came back, it was flowing in the opposite direction. By and large he never altered his routine. Brought up from the age of ten in a municipal hostel, he had gradually lost touch with his father and mother, who lived on the east side of the city and had been unable, or unwilling, to make the journey to see him. Having surrendered his initiative to the dynamics of the city he was reluctant to try to win it back merely for a better cup of coffee. Fortunately his job at the library brought him into contact with a wide range of young people of similar interests. Sooner or later he would marry, find a double cubicle near the library and settle down. If they had enough children (three was the required minimum) they might even one day own a small room of their own.

They stepped out into the pedestrian stream, carried along by it for ten or twenty yards, then quickened their pace and sidestepped through the crowd, slowly tacking across to the other side of the road. There they found the shelter of the shop-fronts, slowly worked their way back to the food-bar, shoulders braced against the countless minor collisions.

'What are the latest population estimates?' Ward asked as they circled a cigarette kiosk, stepping forward whenever a gap presented itself.

Rossiter smiled. 'Sorry, John, I'd like to tell you but you might start a stampede. Besides, you wouldn't believe me.'

Rossiter worked in the Insurance Department at the City Hall, had

informal access to the census statistics. For the last ten years these had been classified information, partly because they were felt to be inaccurate, but chiefly because it was feared they might set off a mass attack of claustrophobia. Minor outbreaks had taken place already, and the official line was that world population had reached a plateau, levelling off at 20,000 million. No one believed this for a moment, and Ward assumed that the 3 per cent annual increase maintained since the 1960s was continuing.

How long it could continue was impossible to estimate. Despite the gloomiest prophecies of the Neo-Malthusians, world agriculture had managed to keep pace with the population growth, although intensive cultivation meant that 95 per cent of the population was permanently trapped in vast urban conurbations. The outward growth of cities had at last been checked; in fact, all over the world former suburban areas were being reclaimed for agriculture and population additions were confined within the existing urban ghettos. The countryside, as such, no longer existed. Every single square foot of ground sprouted a crop of one type or other. The one-time fields and meadows of the world were now, in effect, factory floors, as highly mechanized and closed to the public as any industrial area. Economic and ideological rivalries had long since faded before one over-riding quest – the internal colonization of the city.

Reaching the food-bar, they pushed themselves into the entrance and joined the scrum of customers pressing six deep against the counter.

'What is really wrong with the population problem,' Ward confided to Rossiter, 'is that no one has ever tried to tackle it. Fifty years ago short-sighted nationalism and industrial expansion put a premium on a rising population curve, and even now the hidden incentive is to have a large family so that you can gain a little privacy. Single people are penalized simply because there are more of them and they don't fit neatly into double or triple cubicles. But it's the large family with its compact, space-saving logistic that is the real villain.'

Rossiter nodded, edging nearer the counter, ready to shout his order. 'Too true. We all look forward to getting married just so that we can have our six square metres.'

Directly in front of them, two girls turned around and smiled. 'Six square metres,' one of them, a dark-haired girl with a pretty oval face, repeated. 'You sound like the sort of young man I ought to get to know. Going into the real estate business, Henry?'

Rossiter grinned and squeezed her arm. 'Hello, Judith. I'm thinking about it actively. Like to join me in a private venture?'

The girl leaned against him as they reached the counter. 'Well, I might. It would have to be legal, though.'

The other girl, Helen Waring, an assistant at the library, pulled Ward's sleeve. 'Have you heard the latest, John? Judith and I have been kicked out of our room. We're on the street right at this minute.'

'What?' Rossiter cried. They collected their soups and coffee and edged back to the rear of the bar. 'What on earth happened?'

Helen explained: 'You know that little broom cupboard outside our cubicle? Judith and I have been using it as a sort of study hole, going in there to read. It's quiet and restful, if you can get used to not breathing. Well, the old girl found out and kicked up a big fuss, said we were breaking the law and so on. In short, out.' Helen paused. 'Now we've heard she's going to let it as a single.'

Rossiter pounded the counter ledge. 'A broom cupboard? Someone's going to live there? But she'll never get a licence.'

Judith shook her head. 'She's got it already. Her brother works in the Housing Department.'

Ward laughed into his soup. 'But how can she let it? No one will live in a broom cupboard.'

Judith stared at him sombrely. 'You really believe that, John?'

Ward dropped his spoon. 'No, I suppose you're right. People will live anywhere. God, I don't know who I feel more sorry for – you two, or the poor devil who'll be living in that cupboard. What are you going to do?'

'A couple in a place two blocks west are sub-letting half their cubicle to us. They've hung a sheet down the middle and Helen and I'll take turns sleeping on a camp bed. I'm not joking, our room's about two feet wide. I said to Helen that we ought to split up again and sublet one half at twice our rent.'

They had a good laugh over all this. Then Ward said good night to the others and went back to his rooming house.

There he found himself with similar problems.

The manager leaned against the flimsy door, a damp cigar butt revolving around his mouth, an expression of morose boredom on his unshaven face.

'You got four point seven two metres,' he told Ward, who was standing out on the staircase, unable to get into his room. Other tenants pressed by on to the landing, where two women in curlers and dressing gowns were arguing with each other, tugging angrily at the wall of trunks and cases. Occasionally the manager glanced at them irritably. 'Four seven two. I worked it out twice.' He said this as if it ended all possibility of argument.

'Ceiling or floor?' Ward asked.

'Ceiling, whaddya think? How can I measure the floor with all this junk?' He kicked at a crate of books protruding from under the bed.

Ward let this pass. 'There's quite a tilt on the wall,' he pointed out. 'As much as three or four degrees.'

The manager nodded vaguely. 'You're definitely over the four. Way over.' He turned to Ward, who had moved down several steps to allow a man and woman to get past. 'I can rent this as a double.'

'What, only four and a half?' Ward said incredulously. 'How?'

The man who had just passed him leaned over the manager's shoulder and sniffed at the room, taking in every detail in a one-second glance. 'You renting a double here, Louie?'

The manager waved him away and then beckoned Ward into the room, closing the door after him.

'It's a nominal five,' he told Ward. 'New regulation, just came out. Anything over four five is a double now.' He eyed Ward shrewdly. 'Well, whaddya want? It's a good room, there's a lot of space here, feels more like a triple. You got access to the staircase, window slit –' He broke off as Ward slumped down on the bed and started to laugh. 'Whatsa matter? Look, if you want a big room like this you gotta pay for it. I want an extra half rental or you get out.'

Ward wiped his eyes, then stood up wearily and reached for the shelves. 'Relax, I'm on my way. I'm going to live in a broom cupboard. "Access to the staircase" – that's really rich. Tell me, Louie, is there life on Uranus?'

Temporarily, he and Rossiter teamed up to rent a double cubicle in a semi-derelict house a hundred yards from the library. The neighbourhood was seedy and faded, the rooming houses crammed with tenants. Most of them were owned by absentee landlords or by the city corporation, and the managers employed were of the lowest type, mere rent-collectors who cared nothing about the way their tenants divided up the living space, and never ventured beyond the first floors. Bottles and empty cans littered the corridors, and the washrooms looked like sumps. Many of the tenants were old and infirm, sitting about listlessly in their narrow cubicles, wheedling at each other back to back through the thin partitions.

Their double cubicle was on the third floor, at the end of a corridor that ringed the building. Its architecture was impossible to follow, rooms letting off at all angles, and luckily the corridor was a cul de sac. The mounds of cases ended four feet from the end wall and a partition divided off the cubicle, just wide enough for two beds. A high window overlooked the area ways of the buildings opposite.

Possessions loaded on to the shelf above his head, Ward lay back on his bed and moodily surveyed the roof of the library through the afternoon haze.

'It's not bad here,' Rossiter told him, unpacking his case. 'I know there's no real privacy and we'll drive each other insane within a week, but at least we haven't got six other people breathing into our ears two feet away.'

The nearest cubicle, a single, was built into the banks of cases half a dozen steps along the corridor, but the occupant, a man of seventy, was deaf and bed-ridden.

'It's not bad,' Ward echoed reluctantly. 'Now tell me what the latest growth figures are. They might console me.'

Rossiter paused, lowering his voice. 'Four per cent. *Eight hundred million extra people in one year* – just less than half the earth's total population in 1950.'

Ward whistled slowly. 'So they will revalue. What to? Three and a half?'

'Three. From the first of next year.'

'Three square metres!' Ward sat up and looked around him. 'It's unbelievable! The world's going insane, Rossiter. For God's sake, when are they going to do something about it? Do you realize there soon won't be room enough to sit down, let alone lie down?'

Exasperated, he punched the wall beside him, on the second blow knocked in one of the small wooden panels that had been lightly papered over.

'Hey!' Rossiter yelled. 'You're breaking the place down.' He dived across the bed to retrieve the panel, which hung downwards supported by a strip of paper. Ward slipped his hand into the dark interval, carefully drew the panel back on to the bed.

'Who's on the other side?' Rossiter whispered. 'Did they hear?'

Ward peered through the interval, eyes searching the dim light. Suddenly he dropped the panel and seized Rossiter's shoulder, pulled him down on to the bed.

'Henry! Look!'

Directly in front of them, faintly illuminated by a grimy skylight, was a medium-sized room some fifteen feet square, empty except for the dust silted up against the skirting boards. The floor was bare, a few strips of frayed linoleum running across it, the walls covered with a drab floral design. Here and there patches of the paper peeled off and segments of the picture rail had rotted away, but otherwise the room was in habitable condition.

Breathing slowly, Ward closed the open door of the cubicle with his foot, then turned to Rossiter.

'Henry, do you realize what we've found? Do you realize it, man?'

'Shut up. For Pete's sake keep your voice down.' Rossiter examined the room carefully. 'It's fantastic. I'm trying to see whether anyone's used it recently.'

'Of course they haven't,' Ward pointed out. 'It's obvious. There's no door into the room. We're looking through it now. They must have panelled over this door years ago and forgotten about it. Look at that filth everywhere.'

Rossiter was staring into the room, his mind staggered by its vastness.

'You're right,' he murmured. 'Now, when do we move in?'

Panel, by panel, they prised away the lower half of the door and nailed it on to a wooden frame, so that the dummy section could be replaced instantly.

Then, picking an afternoon when the house was half empty and the manager asleep in his basement office, they made their first foray into the room, Ward going in alone while Rossiter kept guard in the cubicle.

For an hour they exchanged places, wandering silently around the dusty room, stretching their arms out to feel its unconfined emptiness, grasping

at the sensation of absolute spatial freedom. Although smaller than many of the sub-divided rooms in which they had lived, this room seemed infinitely larger, its walls huge cliffs that soared upward to the skylight.

Finally, two or three days later, they moved in.

For the first week Rossiter slept alone in the room, Ward in the cubicle outside, both there together during the day. Gradually they smuggled in a few items of furniture: two armchairs, a table, a lamp fed from the socket in the cubicle. The furniture was heavy and Victorian; the cheapest available, its size emphasized the emptiness of the room. Pride of place was taken by an enormous mahogany wardrobe, fitted with carved angels and castellated mirrors, which they were forced to dismantle and carry into the house in their suitcases. Towering over them, it reminded Ward of the micro-films of gothic cathedrals, with their massive organ lofts crossing vast naves.

After three weeks they both slept in the room, finding the cubicle unbearably cramped. An imitation Japanese screen divided the room adequately and did nothing to diminish its size. Sitting there in the evenings, surrounded by his books and albums, Ward steadily forgot the city outside. Luckily he reached the library by a back alley and avoided the crowded streets. Rossiter and himself began to seem the only real inhabitants of the world, everyone else a meaningless by-product of their own existence, a random replication of identity which had run out of control.

It was Rossiter who suggested that they ask the two girls to share the room with them.

'They've been kicked out again and may have to split up,' he told Ward, obviously worried that Judith might fall into bad company. 'There's always a rent freeze after a revaluation but all the landlords know about it so they're not re-letting. It's damned difficult to find anywhere.'

Ward nodded, relaxing back around the circular red-wood table. He played with the tassel of the arsenic-green lamp shade, for a moment felt like a Victorian man of letters, leading a spacious, leisurely life among overstuffed furnishings.

'I'm all for it,' he agreed, indicating the empty corners. 'There's plenty of room here. But we'll have to make sure they don't gossip about it.'

After due precautions, they let the two girls into the secret, enjoying their astonishment at finding this private universe.

'We'll put a partition across the middle,' Rossiter explained, 'then take it down each morning. You'll be able to move in within a couple of days. How do you feel?'

'Wonderful!' They goggled at the wardrobe, squinting at the endless reflections in the mirrors.

There was no difficulty getting them in and out of the house. The

turnover of tenants was continuous and bills were placed in the mail rack. No one cared who the girls were or noticed their regular calls at the cubicle.

However, half an hour after they arrived neither of them had unpacked her suitcase.

'What's up, Judith?' Ward asked, edging past the girls' beds into the narrow interval between the table and wardrobe.

Judith hesitated, looking from Ward to Rossiter, who sat on the bed, finishing off the plywood partition. 'John, it's just that . . .'

Helen Waring, more matter-of-fact, took over, her fingers straightening the bed-spread. 'What Judith's trying to say is that our position here is a little embarrassing. The partition is –'

Rossiter stood up. 'For heaven's sake, don't worry, Helen,' he assured her, speaking in the loud whisper they had all involuntarily cultivated. 'No funny business, you can trust us. This partition is as solid as a rock.'

The two girls nodded. 'It's not that,' Helen explained, 'but it isn't up all the time. We thought that if an older person were here, say Judith's aunt – she wouldn't take up much room and be no trouble, she's really awfully sweet – we wouldn't need to bother about the partition – except at night,' she added quickly.

Ward glanced at Rossiter, who shrugged and began to scan the floor.

'Well, it's an idea,' Rossiter said. 'John and I know how you feel. Why not?'

'Sure,' Ward agreed. He pointed to the space between the girls' beds and the table. 'One more won't make any difference.'

The girls broke into whoops. Judith went over to Rossiter and kissed him on the cheek. 'Sorry to be a nuisance, Henry.' She smiled at him. 'That's a wonderful partition you've made. You couldn't do another one for Auntie – just a little one? She's very sweet but she is getting on.'

'Of course,' Rossiter said. 'I understand. I've got plenty of wood left over.'

Ward looked at his watch. 'It's seven-thirty, Judith. You'd better get in touch with your aunt. She may not be able to make it tonight.'

Judith buttoned her coat. 'Oh she will,' she assured Ward. 'I'll be back in a jiffy.'

The aunt arrived within five minutes, three heavy suitcases soundly packed.

'It's amazing,' Ward remarked to Rossiter three months later. 'The size of this room still staggers me. It almost gets larger every day.'

Rossiter agreed readily, averting his eyes from one of the girls changing behind the central partition. This they now left in place as dismantling it daily had become tiresome. Besides, the aunt's subsidiary partition was attached to it and she resented the continuous upsets. Ensuring she followed the entrance and exit drills through the camouflaged door and cubicle was difficult enough.

Despite this, detection seemed unlikely. The room had obviously been built as an afterthought into the central well of the house and any noise was masked by the luggage stacked in the surrounding corridor. Directly below was a small dormitory occupied by several elderly women, and Judith's aunt, who visited them socially, swore that no sounds came through the heavy ceiling. Above, the fanlight let out through a dormer window, its lights indistinguishable from the hundred other bulbs in the windows of the house.

Rossiter finished off the new partition he was building and held it upright, fitting it into the slots nailed to the wall between his bed and Ward's. They had agreed that this would provide a little extra privacy.

'No doubt I'll have to do one for Judith and Helen,' he confided to Ward.

Ward adjusted his pillow. They had smuggled the two armchairs back to the furniture shop as they took up too much space. The bed, anyway, was more comfortable. He had never become completely used to the soft upholstery.

'Not a bad idea. What about some shelving around the wall? I've got nowhere to put anything.'

The shelving tidied the room considerably, freeing large areas of the floor. Divided by their partitions, the five beds were in line along the rear wall, facing the mahogany wardrobe. In between was an open space of three or four feet, a further six feet on either side of the wardrobe.

The sight of so much spare space fascinated Ward. When Rossiter mentioned that Helen's mother was ill and badly needed personal care he immediately knew where her cubicle could be placed – at the foot of his bed, between the wardrobe and the side wall.

Helen was overjoyed. 'It's awfully good of you, John,' she told him, 'but would you mind if Mother slept beside me? There's enough space to fit an extra bed in.'

So Rossiter dismantled the partitions and moved them closer together, six beds now in line along the wall. This gave each of them an interval two and a half feet wide, just enough room to squeeze down the side of their beds. Lying back on the extreme right, the shelves two feet above his head, Ward could barely see the wardrobe, but the space in front of him, a clear six feet to the wall ahead, was uninterrupted.

Then Helen's father arrived.

Knocking on the door of the cubicle, Ward smiled at Judith's aunt as she let him in. He helped her swing out the made-up bed which guarded the entrance, then rapped on the wooden panel. A moment later Helen's father, a small, grey-haired man in an undershirt, braces tied to his trousers with string, pulled back the panel.

Ward nodded to him and stepped over the luggage piled around the floor at the foot of the beds. Helen was in her mother's cubicle, helping

the old woman to drink her evening broth. Rossiter, perspiring heavily, was on his knees by the mahogany wardrobe, wrenching apart the frame of the central mirror with a jemmy. Pieces of the wardrobe lay on his bed and across the floor.

'We'll have to start taking these out tomorrow,' Rossiter told him. Ward waited for Helen's father to shuffle past and enter his cubicle. He had rigged up a small cardboard door, and locked it behind him with a crude hook of bent wire.

Rossiter watched him, frowning irritably. 'Some people are happy. This wardrobe's a hell of a job. How did we ever decide to buy it?'

Ward sat down on his bed. The partition pressed against his knees and he could hardly move. He looked up when Rossiter was engaged and saw that the dividing line he had marked in pencil was hidden by the encroaching partition. Leaning against the wall, he tried to ease it back again, but Rossiter had apparently nailed the lower edge to the floor.

There was a sharp tap on the outside cubicle door – Judith returning from her office. Ward started to get up and then sat back. 'Mr Waring,' he called softly. It was the old man's duty night.

Waring shuffled to the door of his cubicle and unlocked it fussily, clucking to himself.

'Up and down, up and down,' he muttered. He stumbled over Rossiter's tool-bag and swore loudly, then added meaningly over his shoulder: 'If you ask me there's too many people in here. Down below they've only got six to our seven, and it's the same size room.'

Ward nodded vaguely and stretched back on his narrow bed, trying not to bang his head on the shelving. Waring was not the first to hint that he move out. Judith's aunt had made a similar suggestion two days earlier. Since he had left his job at the library (the small rental he charged the others paid for the little food he needed) he spent most of his time in the room, seeing rather more of the old man than he wanted to, but he had learned to tolerate him.

Settling himself, he noticed that the right-hand spire of the wardrobe, all he had been able to see of it for the past two months, was now dismantled.

It had been a beautiful piece of furniture, in a way symbolizing this whole private world, and the salesman at the store told him there were few like it left. For a moment Ward felt a sudden pang of regret, as he had done as a child when his father, in a moment of exasperation, had taken something away from him and he had known he would never see it again.

Then he pulled himself together. It was a beautiful wardrobe, without doubt, but when it was gone it would make the room seem even larger.

1961

THE GENTLE ASSASSIN

By noon, when Dr Jamieson arrived in London, all entrances into the city had been sealed since six o'clock that morning. The Cornonation Day crowds had waited in their places along the procession route for almost twenty-four hours, and Green Park was deserted as Dr Jamieson slowly made his way up the sloping grass towards the Underground station below the Ritz. Abandoned haversacks and sleeping bags lay about among the litter under the trees, and twice Dr Jamieson stumbled slightly. By the time he reached the station entrance he was perspiring freely, and sat down on a bench, resting his heavy gun-metal suitcase on the grass.

Directly in front of him was one of the high wooden stands. He could see the backs of the top row of spectators, women in bright summer dresses, men in shirtsleeves, newspapers shielding their heads from the hot sunlight, parties of children singing and waving their Union Jacks. All the way down Piccadilly the office blocks were crammed with people leaning out of windows, and the street was a mass of colour and noise. Now and then bands played in the distance, or an officer in charge of the troops lining the route bellowed an order and re-formed his men.

Dr Jamieson listened with interest to all these sounds, savouring the sun-filled excitement. In his middle sixties, he was a small neat figure with greying hair and alert sensitive eyes. His forehead was broad, with a marked slope, which made his somewhat professorial manner appear more youthful. This was helped by the rakish cut of his grey silk suit, its ultra-narrow lapels fastened by a single embroidered button, heavy braided seams on the sleeves and trousers. As someone emerged from the first-aid marquee at the far end of the stand and walked towards him Dr Jamieson sensed the discrepancy between their attire – the man was wearing a baggy blue suit with huge flapping lapels – and frowned to himself in annoyance. Glancing at his watch, he picked up the suitcase and hurried into the Underground station.

The Coronation procession was expected to leave Westminster Abbey at three o'clock, and the streets through which the cortège would pass had been closed to traffic by the police. As he emerged from the station exit on the north side of Piccadilly, Dr Jamieson looked around carefully at the tall office blocks and hotels, here and there repeating a name to himself as he identified a once-familiar landmark. Edging along behind the crowds packed on to the pavement, the metal suitcase bumping painfully

against his knees, he reached the entrance to Bond Street, there deliberated carefully and began to walk to the taxi rank fifty yards away. The people pressing down towards Piccadilly glanced at him curiously, and he was relieved when he climbed into the taxi.

'Hotel Westland,' he told the driver, refusing help with the suitcase.

The man cocked one ear. 'Hotel *where*?'

'Westland,' Dr Jamieson repeated, trying to match the modulations of his voice to the driver's. Everyone around him seemed to speak in the same guttural tones. 'It's in Oxford Street, one hundred and fifty yards east of Marble Arch. I think you'll find there's a temporary entrance in Grosvenor Place.'

The driver nodded, eyeing his elderly passenger warily. As they moved off he leaned back. 'Come to see the Coronation?'

'No,' Dr Jamieson said matter-of-factly. 'I'm here on business. Just for the day.'

'I thought maybe you came to watch the procession. You get a wonderful view from the Westland.'

'So I believe. Of course, I'll watch if I get a chance.'

They swung into Grosvenor Square and Dr Jamieson steered the suitcase back onto the seat, examining the intricate metal clasps to make sure the lid held securely. He peered up at the buildings around him, trying not to let his heart become excited as the memories rolled back. Everything, however, differed completely from his recollections, the overlay of the intervening years distorting the original images without his realizing it. The perspectives of the street, the muddle of unrelated buildings and tangle of overhead wires, the signs that sprouted in profuse variety at the slightest opportunity, all seemed entirely new. The whole city was incredibly antiquated and confused, and he found it hard to believe that he had once lived there.

Were his other memories equally false?

He sat forward with surprise, pointing through the open window at the graceful beehive curtain-wall of the American Embassy, answering his question.

The driver noticed his interest, flicked away his cigarette. 'Funny style of place,' he commented. 'Can't understand the Yanks putting up a dump like that.'

'Do you think so?' Dr Jamieson asked. 'Not many people would agree with you.'

The driver laughed. 'You're wrong there, mister. I never heard a good word for it yet.' He shrugged, deciding not to offend his passenger. 'Still, maybe it's just ahead of its time.'

Dr Jamieson smiled thinly at this. 'That's about it,' he said, more to himself than to the driver. 'Let's say about thirty-five years ahead. They'll think very highly of it then.'

His voice had involuntarily become more nasal, and the driver asked: 'You from abroad, sir? New Zealand, maybe?'

'No,' Dr Jamieson said, noticing that the traffic was moving down the left-hand side of the road. 'Not exactly. I haven't been to London for some time, though. But I seem to have picked a good day to come back.'

'You have that, sir. A great day for the young Prince. Or King I should say, rather. King James III, sounds a bit peculiar. But good luck to him, and the new Jack-a-what's-a-name Age.'

'The New Jacobean Age,' Dr Jamieson corrected, laughter softening his face for the first time that day. 'Oh yes, that was it.' Fervently, his hands straying to the metal suitcase, he added *sotto voce*: 'As you say, good luck to it.'

Stepping out at the hotel, he went in through the temporary entrance, pushed among the throng of people in the small rear foyer, the noise from Oxford Street dinning in his ears. After a five-minute wait, he reached the desk, the suitcase pulling wearily at his arm.

'Dr Roger Jamieson,' he told the clerk. 'I have a room reserved on the first floor.' He leaned against the counter as the clerk hunted through the register, listening to the hubbub in the foyer. Most of the people were stout middle-aged women in floral dresses, conversing excitedly on their way to the TV lounge, where the Abbey ceremony would be on at two o'clock. Dr Jamieson ignored them, examining the others in the foyer, telegraph messenger boys, off-duty waiters, members of the catering staff organizing the parties held in the rooms above. Each of their faces he scrutinized carefully, as if expecting to see someone he knew.

The clerk peered shortsightedly at the ledger. 'Was the reservation in your name, sir?'

'Certainly. Room 17, the corner room on the first floor.'

The clerk shook his head doubtfully. 'There must have been some mistake, sir, we have no record of any reservation. You aren't with one of the parties upstairs?'

Controlling his impatience, Dr Jamieson rested the suitcase on the floor, securing it against the desk with his foot. 'I assure you, I made the reservation myself. Explicitly for Room 17. It was some time ago but the manager told me it was completely in order and would not be cancelled whatever happened.'

Leafing through the entries, the clerk ran carefully through the entries marked off that day. Suddenly he pointed to a faded entry at the top of the first page.

'Here we are, sir. I apologize, but the booking had been brought forward from the previous register. "Dr Roger Jamieson, Room 17."' Putting his finger on the date with surprise, he smiled at Dr Jamieson. 'A lucky choice of day, Doctor, your booking was made over two years ago.'

Finally locking the door of his room, Dr Jamieson sat down thankfully on one of the beds, his hands still resting on the metal case. For a few minutes he slowly recovered his breath, kneading the numbed muscles in

his right forearm. Then he pulled himself to his feet and began a careful inspection of the room.

One of the larger rooms in the hotel, the two corner windows gave it a unique view over the crowded street below. Venetian blinds screened the windows from the hot sunlight and the hundreds of people in the balconies of the department store opposite. Dr Jamieson first peered into the built-in cupboards, then tested the bathroom window onto the interior well. Satisfied that they were secure, he moved an armchair over to the side window which faced the procession's direction of approach. His view was uninterrupted for several hundred yards, each one of the soldiers and policemen lining the route plainly visible.

A large piece of red bunting, part of a massive floral tribute, ran diagonally across the window, hiding him from the people in the building adjacent, and he could see down clearly into the pavement, where a crowd ten or twelve deep was pressed against the wooden palisades. Lowering the blind so that the bottom vane was only six inches from the ledge, Dr Jamieson sat forward and quietly scanned them.

None seemed to hold his interest, and he glanced fretfully at his watch. It was just before two o'clock, and the young king would have left Buckingham Palace on his way to the Abbey. Many members of the crowd were carrying portable radios, and the din outside slackened off as the commentary from the Abbey began.

Dr Jamieson went over to the bed and pulled out his key-chain. Both locks on the case were combination devices. He switched the key left and right a set number of times, pressed home and lifted the lid.

Lying inside the case, on the lower half of the divided velvet mould, were the dismantled members of a powerful sporting rifle, and a magazine of six shells. The metal butt had been shortened by six inches and canted so that when raised to the shoulder in the firing position the breach and barrel pointed downwards at an angle of 45°, both the sights in line with the eye.

Unclipping the sections, Dr Jamieson expertly assembled the weapon, screwing in the butt and adjusting it to the most comfortable angle. Fitting on the magazine, he snapped back the bolt, then pressed it forward and drove the top shell into the breach.

His back to the window, he stared down at the loaded weapon lying on the bedspread in the dim light, listening to the roistering from the parties farther along the corridor, the uninterrupted roar from the street outside. He seemed suddenly very tired, for once the firmness and resolution in his face faded and he looked like an old weary man, friendless in a hotel room in a strange city where everyone but himself was celebrating. He sat down on the bed beside the rifle, wiping the gun-grease off his hands with his handkerchief, his thoughts apparently far away. When he rose he moved stiffly and looked uncertainly around the room, as if wondering why he was there.

Then he pulled himself together. Quickly he dismantled the rifle, clipped the sections into their hasps and lowered the lid, then placed the case in the bottom drawer of the bureau, adding the key to his chain ring. Locking the door behind him, he made his way out of the hotel, a determined spring in his step.

Two hundred yards down Grosvenor Place, he turned into Hallam Street, a small thoroughfare interspersed with minor art galleries and restaurants. Sunlight played on the striped awnings and the deserted street might have been miles from the crowds along the Coronation route. Dr Jamieson felt his confidence return. Every dozen yards or so he stopped under the awnings and surveyed the empty pavements, listening to the distant TV commentaries from the flats above the shops.

Halfway down the street was a small café with three tables outside. Sitting with his back to the window, Dr Jamieson took out a pair of sunglasses and relaxed in the shade, ordering an iced orange juice from the waitress. He sipped it quietly, his face masked by the dark lenses with their heavy frames. Periodically, prolonged cheers drifted across the roof-tops from Oxford Street, marking the progress of the Abbey ceremony, but otherwise the street was quiet.

Shortly after three o'clock, when the deep droning of an organ on the TV sets announced that the Coronation service had ended, Dr Jamieson heard the sounds of feet approaching on his left. Leaning back under the awning, he saw a young man and girl in a white dress walking hand in hand. As they drew nearer Dr Jamieson removed his glasses to inspect the couple more closely, then quickly replaced them and rested one elbow on the table, masking his face with his hand.

The couple were too immersed in each other to notice Dr Jamieson watching them, although to anyone else his intense nervous excitement would have been obvious. The man was about twenty-eight, dressed in the baggy unpressed clothes Dr Jamieson had found everyone wearing in London, an old tie casually hand-knotted around a soft collar. Two fountain pens protruded from his breast pocket, a concert programme from another, and he had the pleasantly informal appearance of a young university lecturer. His handsome introspective face was topped by a sharply sloping forehead, thinning brown hair brushed back with his fingers. He gazed into the girl's face with patent affection, listening to her light chatter with occasional amused interjections.

Dr Jamieson was also looking at the girl. At first he had stared fixedly at the young man, watching his movements and facial expressions with the oblique wariness of a man seeing himself in a mirror, but his attention soon turned to the girl. A feeling of enormous relief surged through him, and he had to restrain himself from leaping out of his seat. He had been frightened of his memories, but the girl was more, not less beautiful than he had remembered.

Barely nineteen or twenty, she strolled along with her head thrown

back, long straw-coloured hair drifting lightly across her softly tanned shoulders. Her mouth was full and alive, her wild eyes watching the young man mischievously.

As they passed the café she was in full flight about something, and the young man cut in: 'Hold on, June, I need a rest. Let's sit down and have a drink, the procession won't reach Marble Arch for half an hour.'

'Poor old chap, am I wearing you out?' They sat at the table next to Dr Jamieson, the girl's bare arm only a few inches away, the fresh scent of her body adding itself to his other recollections. Already a whirlwind of memories reeled in his mind, her neat mobile hands, the way she held her chin and spread her flared white skirt across her thighs. 'Still, I don't really care if I miss the procession. This is *my* day, not his.'

The young man grinned, pretending to get up. 'Really? They've all been misinformed. Just wait here, I'll get the procession diverted.' He held her hand across the table, peered critically at the small diamond on her finger. 'Pretty feeble effort. Who bought that for you?'

The girl kissed it fondly. 'It's as big as the Ritz.' She gave a playful growl. 'H'm, what a man, I'll have to marry him one of these days. Roger, isn't it wonderful about the Prize? Three hundred pounds! You're really rich. A pity the Royal Society don't let you spend it on anything, like the Nobel Prizes. Wait till you get one of those.'

The young man smiled modestly. 'Easy darling, don't build your hopes on that.'

'But of course you will. I'm absolutely sure. After all, you've more or less discovered time travel.'

The young man drummed on the table. 'June, for heaven's sake, get this straight, I have *not* discovered time travel.' He lowered his voice, conscious of Dr Jamieson sitting at the next table, the only other person in the deserted street. 'People will think I'm insane if you go around saying that.'

The girl screwed up her pert nose. 'You have, though, let's face it. I know you don't like the phrase, but once you take away the algebra that's what it boils down to, doesn't it?'

The young man gazed reflectively at the table top, his face, as it grew serious, assuming massive intellectual strength. 'In so far as mathematical concepts have their analogies in the physical universe, yes – but that's an enormous caveat. And even then it's not time travel in the usual sense, though I realize the popular press won't agree when my paper in *Nature* comes out. Anyway, I'm not particularly interested in the time aspect. If I had thirty years to spare it might be worth pursuing, but I've got more important things to do.'

He smiled at the girl, but she leaned forward thoughtfully, taking his hands. 'Roger, I'm not so sure you're right. You say it hasn't any applications in everyday life, but scientists always think that. It's really fantastic, to be able to go backward in time. I mean –'

'Why? We're able to go *forward* in time now, and no one's throwing their hats in the air. The universe itself is just a time machine that from our end of the show seems to be running one way. Or mostly one way. I happened to have noticed that particles in a cyclotron sometimes move in the opposite direction, that's all, arrive at the end of their infinitesimal trips before they've started. That doesn't mean that next week we'll all be able to go back and murder our own grandfathers.'

'What would happen if you did? Seriously?'

The young man laughed. 'I don't know. Frankly, I don't like to think about it. Maybe that's the real reason why I want to keep the work on a theoretical basis. If you extend the problem to its logical conclusion my observations at Harwell must be faulty, because events in the universe obviously take place independently of time, which is just the perspective we put on them. Years from now the problem will probably be known as the Jamieson Paradox, and aspiring mathematicians will be bumping off their grandparents wholesale in the hope of disproving it. We'll have to make sure that all our grandchildren are admirals or archbishops.'

As he spoke Dr Jamieson was watching the girl, every fibre in his body strained to prevent himself from touching her on the arm and speaking to her. The pattern of freckles on her slim forearm, the creases in her dress below her shoulder blades, her minute toenails with their chipped varnish, was each an absolute revelation of his own existence.

He took off his sunglasses and for a moment he and the young man stared straight at each other. The latter seemed embarrassed, realizing the remarkable physiognomical similarity between them, the identical bone structure of their faces, and angled sweep of their foreheads. Fleetingly, Dr Jamieson smiled at him, a feeling of deep, almost paternal affection for the young man coming over him. His naïve earnestness and honesty, his relaxed, gawky charm, were suddenly more important than his intellectual qualities, and Dr Jamieson knew that he felt no jealousy towards him.

He put on his glasses and looked away down the street, his resolve to carry through the next stages of his plan strengthened.

The noise from the streets beyond rose sharply, and the couple leapt to their feet.

'Come on, it's three-thirty!' the young man cried. 'They must be almost here.'

As they ran off the girl paused to straighten her sandal, looking back at the old man in dark glasses who had sat behind her. Dr Jamieson leaned forward, waiting for her to speak, one hand outstretched, but the girl merely looked away and he sank into his chair.

When they reached the first intersection he stood up and hurried back to his hotel.

Locking the door of his room, Dr Jamieson quickly pulled the case from the bureau, assembled the rifle and sat down with it in front of the

window. The Coronation procession was already passing, the advance files of marching soldiers and guardsmen, in their ceremonial uniforms, each led by a brass band drumming out martial airs. The crowd roared and cheered, tossing confetti and streamers into the hot sunlight.

Dr Jamieson ignored them and peered below the blind onto the pavement. Carefully he searched the throng, soon picked out the girl in the white dress tip-toeing at the back. She smiled at the people around her and wormed her way towards the front, pulling the young man by the hand. For a few minutes Dr Jamieson followed the girl's every movement, then as the first landaus of the diplomatic corps appeared he began to search the remainder of the crowd, scrutinizing each face carefully, line upon line. From his pocket he withdrew a small plastic envelope; he held it away from his face and broke the seal. There was a hiss of greenish gas and he drew out a large newspaper cutting, yellowed with age, folded to reveal a man's portrait.

Dr Jamieson propped it against the window ledge. The cutting showed a dark-jowled man of about thirty with a thin weasel-like face, obviously a criminal photographed by the police. Under it was the caption: *Anton Remmers.*

Dr Jamieson sat forward intently. The diplomatic corps passed in their carriages, followed by members of the government riding in open cars, waving their silk hats at the crowd. Then came more Horse Guards, and there was a tremendous roar farther down the street as the spectators near Oxford Circus saw the royal coach approaching.

Anxiously, Dr Jamieson looked at his watch. It was three forty-five, and the royal coach was due to pass the hotel in only seven minutes. Around him a tumult of noise made it difficult to concentrate, and the TV sets in the near-by rooms seemed to be at full volume.

Suddenly he clenched the window ledge.

'Remmers!' Directly below, in the entrance to a cigarette kiosk, was a sallow-faced man in a wide-brimmed green hat. He stared at the procession impassively, hands deep in the pockets of a cheap raincoat. Fumbling, Dr Jamieson raised the rifle, resting the barrel on the ledge, watching the man. He made no attempt to press forward into the crowd, and waited by the kiosk, only a few feet from a small arcade that ran back into a side street.

Dr Jamieson began to search the crowd again, the effort draining his face. A gigantic bellow from the crowd deafened him as the gold-plated royal coach hove into view behind a bobbing escort of household cavalry. He tried to see if Remmers looked around at an accomplice, but the man was motionless, hands deep in his pockets.

'Damn you!' Dr Jamieson snarled. 'Where's the other one?' Frantically he pushed away the blind, every ounce of his shrewdness and experience expended as he carried out a dozen split-second character analyses of the people below.

'There were two of them!' he shouted hoarsely to himself. 'There were *two*!'

Fifty yards away, the young king sat back in the golden coach, his robes a blaze of colour in the sunlight. Distracted, Dr Jamieson watched him, then realized abruptly that Remmers had moved. The man was now stepping swiftly around the edge of the crowd, darting about on his lean legs like a distraught tiger. As the crowd surged forward, he pulled a blue thermos flask from his raincoat pocket, with a quick motion unscrewed the cap. The royal coach drew abreast and Remmers transferred the thermos to his right hand, a metal plunger clearly visible in the mouth of the flask.

'*Remmers* had the bomb!' Dr Jamieson gasped, completely disconcerted. Remmers stepped back, extended his right hand low to the ground behind him like a grenadier and then began to throw the bomb forward with a carefully timed swing.

The rifle had been pointed at the man automatically and Dr Jamieson trained the sights on his chest and fired, just before the bomb left his hand. The discharge jolted Dr Jamieson off his feet, the impact tearing at his shoulder, the rifle jangling up into the venetian blind. Remmers slammed back crookedly into the cigarette kiosk, legs lolling, his face like a skull's. The bomb had been knocked out of his hand and was spinning straight up into the air as if tossed by a juggler. It landed on the pavement a few yards away, kicked underfoot as the crowd surged sideways after the royal coach.

Then it exploded.

There was a blinding pulse of expanding air, followed by a tremendous eruption of smoke and hurtling particles. The window facing the street dropped in a single piece and shattered on the floor at Dr Jamieson's feet, driving him back in a blast of glass and torn plastic. He fell across the chair, recovered himself as the shouts outside turned to screams, then dragged himself over to the window and stared out through the stinging air. The crowd was fanning out across the road, people running in all directions, horses rearing under their helmetless riders. Below the window twenty or thirty people lay or sat on the pavement. The royal coach, one wheel missing but otherwise intact, was being dragged away by its team of horses, guardsmen and troops encircling it. Police were swarming down the road towards the hotel, and Dr Jamieson saw someone point up to him and shout.

He looked down at the edge of the pavement, where a girl in a white dress was stretched on her back, her legs twisted strangely. The young man kneeling beside her, his jacket split down the centre of his back, had covered her face with his handkerchief, and a dark stain spread slowly across the tissue.

Voices rose in the corridor outside. He turned away from the window, the rifle still in his hand. On the floor at his feet, unfurled by the blast

of the explosion, was the faded newspaper cutting. Numbly, his mouth slack, Dr Jamieson picked it up.

ASSASSINS ATTEMPT TO MURDER KING JAMES
Bomb Kills 27 in Oxford Street
Two men shot dead by police

A sentence had been ringed: '. . . one was Anton Remmers, a professional killer believed to have been hired by the second assassin, an older man whose bullet-ridden body the police are unable to identify . . .'

Fists pounded on the door. A voice shouted, then kicked at the handle. Dr Jamieson dropped the cutting, and looked down at the young man kneeling over the girl, holding her dead hands.

As the door ripped back off its hinges he knew who the second unknown assassin was, the man he had returned to kill after thirty-five years. So his attempt to alter past events had been fruitless, by coming back he had merely implicated himself in the original crime, doomed since he first analysed the cyclotron freaks to return and help to kill his young bride. If he had not shot Remmers the assassin would have lobbed the bomb into the centre of the road, and June would have lived. His whole stratagem selflessly devised for the young man's benefit, a free gift to his own younger self, had defeated itself, destroying the very person it had been intended to save.

Hoping to see her again for the last time, and warn the young man to forget her, he ran forward into the roaring police guns.

1961

THE INSANE ONES

Ten miles outside Alexandria he picked up the coast road that ran across the top of the continent through Tunis and Algiers to the transatlantic tunnel at Casablanca, gunned the Jaguar up to 120 and burned along through the cool night air, letting the brine-filled slipstream cut into his six-day tan. Lolling back against the headrest as the palms flicked by, he almost missed the girl in the white raincoat waving from the steps of the hotel at El Alamein, had only three hundred yards to plunge the car to a halt below the rusting neon sign.

'Tunis?' the girl called out, belting the man's raincoat around her trim waist, long black hair in a Left Bank cut over one shoulder.

'Tunis – Casablanca – Atlantic City,' Gregory shouted back, reaching across to the passenger door. She swung a yellow briefcase behind the seat, settling herself among the magazines and newspapers as they roared off. The headlamps picked out a United World cruiser parked under the palms in the entrance to the war cemetery, and involuntarily Gregory winced and floored the accelerator, eyes clamped to the rear mirror until the road was safely empty.

At 90 he slacked off and looked at the girl, abruptly felt a warning signal sound again. She seemed like any demi-beatnik, with a long melancholy face and grey skin, but something about her rhythms, the slack facial tone and dead eyes and mouth, made him uneasy. Under a flap of the raincoat was a blue-striped gingham skirt, obviously part of a nurse's uniform, out of character, like the rest of her strange gear. As she slid the magazines into the dashboard locker he saw the home-made bandage around the left wrist.

She noticed him watching her and flashed a too-bright smile, then made an effort at small talk.

'Paris *Vogue*, *Neue Frankfurter*, Tel Aviv *Express* – you've really been moving.' She pulled a pack of Del Montes from the breast pocket of the coat, fumbled unfamiliarly with a large brass lighter. 'First Europe, then Asia, now Africa. You'll run out of continents soon.' Hesitating, she volunteered: 'Carole Sturgeon. Thanks for the lift.'

Gregory nodded, watching the bandage slide around her slim wrist. He wondered which hospital she had sneaked away from. Probably Cairo General, the old-style English uniforms were still worn there. Ten to one the briefcase was packed with some careless salesman's

pharmaceutical samples. 'Can I ask where you're going? This is the back end of nowhere.'

The girl shrugged. 'Just following the road. Cairo, Alex, you know –' She added: 'I went to see the pyramids.' She lay back, rolling slightly against his shoulder. 'That was wonderful. They're the oldest things on earth. Remember their boast: "*Before Abraham, I was*"?'

They hit a dip in the road and Gregory's licence swung out under the steering column. The girl peered down and read it. 'Do you mind? It's a long ride to Tunis. "Charles Gregory, MD –"' She stopped, repeating his name to herself uncertainly.

Suddenly she remembered. '*Gregory!* Dr Charles Gregory! Weren't you – Muriel Bortman, the President's daughter, she drowned herself at Key West, you were sentenced –' She broke off, staring nervously at the windshield.

'You've got a long memory,' Gregory said quietly. 'I didn't think anyone remembered.'

'Of course I remember.' She spoke in a whisper. 'They were mad what they did to you.' For the next few minutes she gushed out a long farrago of sympathy, interspersed with disjointed details from her own life. Gregory tried not to listen, clenching the wheel until his knuckles whitened, deliberately forgetting everything as fast as she reminded him.

There was a pause, as he felt it coming, the way it invariably did. 'Tell me, doctor, I hope you forgive me asking, but since the Mental Freedom laws it's difficult to get help, one's got to be so careful – you too, of course . . .' She laughed uneasily. 'What I really mean is –'

Her edginess drained power from Gregory. '– you need psychiatric assistance,' he cut in, pushing the Jaguar up to 95, eyes swinging to the rear mirror again. The road was dead, palms receding endlessly into the night.

The girl choked on her cigarette, the stub between her fingers a damp mess. 'Well, not me,' she said lamely. 'A close friend of mine. She really needs help, believe me, doctor. Her whole feeling for life is gone, nothing seems to mean anything to her any more.'

Brutally, he said: 'Tell her to look at the pyramids.'

But the girl missed the irony, said quickly: 'Oh, she has. I just left her in Cairo. I promised I'd try to find someone for her.' She turned to examine Gregory, put a hand up to her hair. In the blue desert light she reminded him of the madonnas he had seen in the Louvre two days after his release, when he had run from the filthy prison searching for the most beautiful things in the world, the solemn-faced more-than-beautiful 13-year-olds who had posed for Leonardo and the Bellini brothers. 'I thought perhaps you might know someone –?'

He gripped himself and shook his head. 'I don't. For the last three years I've been out of touch. Anyway, it's against the MF laws. Do you know what would happen if they caught me giving psychiatric treatment?'

Numbly the girl stared ahead at the road. Gregory flipped away his

cigarette, pressing down on the accelerator as the last three years crowded back, memories he had hoped to repress on his 10,000-mile drive . . . three years at the prison farm near Marseilles, treating scrofulous farm-workers and sailors in the dispensary, even squeezing in a little illicit depth analysis for the corporal of police who couldn't satisfy his wife, three embittered years to accept that he would never practise again the one craft in which he was fully himself. Trick-cyclist or assuager of discontents, whatever his title, the psychiatrist had now passed into history, joining the necromancers, sorcerers and other practitioners of the black sciences.

The Mental Freedom legislation enacted ten years earlier by the ultra-conservative UW government had banned the profession outright and enshrined the individual's freedom to be insane if he wanted to, provided he paid the full civil consequences for any infringements of the law. That was the catch, the hidden object of the MF laws. What had begun as a popular reaction against 'subliminal living' and the uncontrolled extension of techniques of mass manipulation for political and economic ends had quickly developed into a systematic attack on the psychological sciences. Over-permissive courts of law with their condoning of delinquency, pseudo-enlightened penal reformers, 'Victims of society', the psychologist and his patient all came under fierce attack. Discharging their self-hate and anxiety onto a convenient scapegoat, the new rulers, and the great majority electing them, outlawed all forms of psychic control, from the innocent market survey to lobotomy. The mentally ill were on their own, spared pity and consideration, made to pay to the hilt for their failings. The sacred cow of the community was the psychotic, free to wander where he wanted, drooling on the doorsteps, sleeping on sidewalks, and woe betide anyone who tried to help him.

Gregory had made that mistake. Escaping to Europe, first home of psychiatry, in the hope of finding a more tolerant climate, he set up a secret clinic in Paris with six other émigré analysts. For five years they worked undetected, until one of Gregory's patients, a tall ungainly girl with a psychogenic stutter, was revealed to be Muriel Bortman, daughter of the UW President-General. The analysis had failed tragically when the clinic was raided; after her death a lavish show trial (making endless play of electric shock apparatus, movies of insulin coma and the testimony of countless paranoids rounded up in the alleyways) had concluded in a three-year sentence.

Now at last he was out, his savings invested in the Jaguar, fleeing Europe and his memories of the prison for the empty highways of North Africa. He didn't want any more trouble.

'I'd like to help,' he told the girl. 'But the risks are too high. All your friend can do is try to come to terms with herself.'

The girl chewed her lip fretfully. 'I don't think she can. Thanks, anyway, doctor.'

* * *

For three hours they sat back silently in the speeding car, until the lights of Tobruk came up ahead, the long curve of the harbour.

'It's 2 A.M.,' Gregory said. 'There's a motel here. I'll pick you up in the morning.'

After they had gone to their rooms he sneaked back to the registry, booked himself into a new chalet. He fell asleep as Carole Sturgeon wandered forlornly up and down the verandas, whispering out his name.

After breakfast he came back from the sea, found a big United World cruiser in the court, orderlies carrying a stretcher out to an ambulance.

A tall Libyan police colonel was leaning against the Jaguar, drumming his leather baton on the windscreen.

'Ah, Dr Gregory. Good morning.' He pointed his baton at the ambulance. 'A profound tragedy, such a beautiful American girl.'

Gregory rooted his feet in the grey sand, with an effort restrained himself from running over to the ambulance and pulling back the sheet. Fortunately the colonel's uniform and thousands of morning and evening cell inspections kept him safely to attention.

'I'm Gregory, yes.' The dust thickened in his throat. 'Is she dead?'

The colonel stroked his neck with the baton. 'Ear to ear. She must have found an old razor blade in the bathroom. About 3 o'clock this morning.' He headed towards Gregory's chalet, gesturing with the baton. Gregory followed him into the half light, stood tentatively by the bed.

'I was asleep then. The clerk will vouch for that.'

'Naturally.' The colonel gazed down at Gregory's possessions spread out across the bedcover, idly poked the black medical bag.

'She asked you for assistance, doctor? With her personal problems?'

'Not directly. She hinted at it, though. She sounded a little mixed up.'

'Poor child.' The colonel lowered his head sympathetically. 'Her father is a first secretary at the Cairo Embassy, something of an autocrat. You Americans are very stern with your children, doctor. A firm hand, yes, but understanding costs nothing. Don't you agree? She was frightened of him, escaped from the American Hospital. My task is to provide an explanation for the authorities. If I had an idea of what was really worrying her . . . no doubt you helped her as best you could?'

Gregory shook his head. 'I gave her no help at all, colonel. In fact, I refused to discuss her problems altogether.' He smiled flatly at the colonel. 'I wouldn't make the same mistake twice, would I?'

The colonel studied Gregory thoughtfully. 'Sensible of you, doctor. But you surprise me. Surely the members of your profession regard themselves as a special calling, answerable to a higher authority. Are these ideals so easy to cast off?'

'I've had a lot of practice.' Gregory began to pack away his things on the bed, bowed to the colonel as he saluted and made his way out into the court.

* * *

Half an hour later he was on the Benghasi road, holding the Jaguar at 100, working off his tension and anger in a savage burst of speed. Free for only ten days, already he had got himself involved again, gone through all the agony of having to refuse help to someone desperately needing it, his hands itching to administer relief to the child but held back by the insane penalties. It wasn't only the lunatic legislation but the people enforcing it who ought to be swept away – Bortman and his fellow oligarchs.

He grimaced at the thought of the cold dead-faced Bortman, addressing the World Senate at Lake Success, arguing for increased penalties for the criminal psychopath. The man had stepped straight out of the 14th-century Inquisition, his bureaucratic puritanism masking two real obsessions: dirt and death. Any sane society would have locked Bortman up for ever, or given him a complete brain-lift. Indirectly Bortman was as responsible for the death of Carole Sturgeon as he would have been had he personally handed the razor blade to her.

After Libya, Tunis. He blazed steadily along the coast road, the sea like a molten mirror on the right, avoiding the big towns where possible. Fortunately they weren't so bad as the European cities, psychotics loitering like stray dogs in the uptown parks, wise enough not to shop-lift or cause trouble, but a petty nuisance on the café terraces, knocking on hotel doors at all hours of the night.

At Algiers he spent three days at the Hilton, having a new engine fitted to the car, and hunted up Philip Kalundborg, an old Toronto colleague now working in a WHO children's hospital.

Over their third carafe of burgundy Gregory told him about Carole Sturgeon.

'It's absurd, but I feel guilty about her. Suicide is a highly suggestive act, I reminded her of Muriel Bortman's death. Damn it, Philip, I could have given her the sort of general advice any sensible layman would have offered.'

'Dangerous. Of course you were right,' Philip assured him. 'After the last three years who could argue otherwise?'

Gregory looked out across the terrace at the traffic whirling over the neon-lit cobbles. Beggars sat at their pitches along the sidewalk, whining for sous.

'Philip, you don't know what it's like in Europe now. At least 5 per cent are probably in need of institutional care. Believe me, I'm frightened to go to America. In New York alone they're jumping from the roofs at the rate of ten a day. The world's turning into a madhouse, one half of society gloating righteously over the torments of the other. Most people don't realize which side of the bars they are. It's easier for you. Here the traditions are different.'

Kalundborg nodded. 'True. In the villages up-country it's been standard practice for centuries to blind schizophrenics and exhibit them in a cage.

Injustice is so widespread that you build up an indiscriminate tolerance to every form.'

A tall dark-bearded youth in faded cotton slacks and rope sandals stepped across the terrace and put his hands on their table. His eyes were sunk deep below his forehead, around his lips the brown staining of narcotic poisoning.

'Christian!' Kalundborg snapped angrily. He shrugged hopelessly at Gregory, then turned to the young man with quiet exasperation. 'My dear fellow, this has gone on for too long. I can't help you, there's no point in asking.'

The young man nodded patiently. 'It's Marie,' he explained in a slow roughened voice. 'I can't control her. I'm frightened what she may do to the baby. Postnatal withdrawal, you know –'

'Nonsense! I'm not an idiot, Christian. The baby is nearly three. If Marie is a nervous wreck you've made her so. Believe me, I wouldn't help you if I was allowed to. You must cure yourself or you are finished. Already you have chronic barbiturism. Dr Gregory here will agree with me.'

Gregory nodded. The young man stared blackly at Kalundborg, glanced at Gregory and then shambled off through the tables.

Kalundborg filled his glass. 'They have it all wrong today. They think our job was to further addiction, not cure it. In their pantheon the father-figure is always benevolent.'

'That's invariably been Bortman's line. Psychiatry is ultimately self-indulgent, an encouragement to weakness and lack of will. Admittedly there's no one more single-minded than an obsessional neurotic. Bortman himself is a good example.'

As he entered the tenth-floor bedroom the young man was going through his valise on the bed. For a moment Gregory wondered whether he was a UW spy, perhaps the meeting on the terrace had been an elaborate trap.

'Find what you want?'

Christian finished whipping through the bag, then tossed it irritably onto the floor. He edged restlessly away from Gregory around the bed, his eyes hungrily searching the wardrobe top and lamp brackets.

'Kalundborg was right,' Gregory told him quietly. 'You're wasting your time.'

'The hell with Kalundborg,' Christian snarled softly. 'He's working the wrong levels. Do you think I'm looking for a jazz heaven, doctor? With a wife and child? I'm not that irresponsible. I took a Master's degree in law at Heidelberg.' He wandered off around the room, then stopped to survey Gregory closely.

Gregory began to slide in the drawers. 'Well, get back to your jurisprudence. There are enough ills to weigh in this world.'

'Doctor, I've made a start. Didn't Kalundborg tell you I sued Bortman for murder?' When Gregory seemed puzzled he explained: 'A private civil

action, not criminal proceedings. My father killed himself five years ago after Bortman had him thrown out of the Bar Association.'

Gregory picked up his valise off the floor. 'I'm sorry,' he said noncommittally. 'What happened to your suit against Bortman?'

Christian stared out through the window into the dark air. 'It was never entered. Some World Bureau investigators saw me after I started to be a nuisance and suggested I leave the States for ever. So I came to Europe to get my degree. I'm on my way back now. I need the barbiturates to stop myself trying to toss a bomb at Bortman.'

Suddenly he propelled himself across the room, before Gregory could stop him was out on the balcony, jack-knifed over the edge. Gregory dived after him, kicked away his feet and tried to pull him off the ledge. Christian clung to it, shouting into the darkness, the lights from the cars racing in the damp street below. On the sidewalk people looked up.

Christian was doubled up with laughter as they fell back into the room, slumped down on the bed, pointing his finger at Gregory, who was leaning against the wardrobe, gasping in exhausted spasms.

'Big mistake there, doctor. You better get out fast before I tip off the Police Prefect. Stopping a suicide! God, with your record you'd get ten years for that. What a joke!'

Gregory shook him by the shoulders, temper flaring. 'Listen, what are you playing at? What do you want?'

Christian pushed Gregory's hands away and lay back weakly. 'Help me, doctor. I want to kill Bortman, it's all I think about. If I'm not careful I'll really try. Show me how to forget him.' His voice rose desperately. 'Damn, I *hated* my father, I was glad when Bortman threw him out.'

Gregory eyed him thoughtfully, then went over to the window and bolted out the night.

Two months later, at the motel outside Casablanca, Gregory finally burned the last of the analysis notes. Christian, clean-shaven and wearing a neat white tropical suit, a neutral tie, watched from the door as the stack of coded entries gutted out in the ashtray, then carried them into the bathroom and flushed them away.

When Christian had loaded his suitcases into the car Gregory said: 'One thing before we go. A complete analysis can't be effected in two months, let alone two years. It's something you work at all your life. If you have a relapse, come to me, even if I'm in Tahiti, or Shanghai or Archangel.' Gregory paused. 'If they ever find out, you know what will happen?' When Christian nodded quietly he sat down in the chair by the writing table, gazing out through the date palms at the huge domed mouth of the transatlantic tunnel a mile away. For a long time he knew he would be unable to relax. In a curious way he

felt that the three years at Marseilles had been wasted, that he was starting a suspended sentence of indefinite length. There had been no satisfaction at the successful treatment, perhaps because he had given in to Christian partly for fear of being incriminated in an attack on Bortman.

'With luck, you should be able to live with yourself now. Try to remember that whatever evils Bortman may perpetrate in the future he's irrelevant to *your* problem. It was the stroke your mother suffered after your father's death that made you realize the guilt you felt subconsciously for hating him, but you conveniently shifted the blame onto Bortman, and by eliminating him you thought you could free yourself. The temptation may occur again.'

Christian nodded, standing motionlessly by the doorway. His face had filled out, his eyes were a placid grey. He looked like any well-groomed UW bureaucrat.

Gregory picked up a newspaper. 'I see Bortman is attacking the American Bar Association as a subversive body, probably planning to have it proscribed. If it succeeds it'll be an irreparable blow to civil liberty.' He looked up thoughtfully at Christian, who showed no reaction. 'Right, let's go. Are you still fixed on getting back to the States?'

'Of course.' Christian climbed into the car, then shook Gregory's hand. Gregory had decided to stay in Africa, find a hospital where he could work and had given Christian the car. 'Marie will wait for me in Algiers until I finish my business.'

'What's that?'

Christian pressed the starter, sent a roar of dust and exhaust across the compound.

'I'm going to kill Bortman,' he said quietly.

Gregory gripped the windscreen. 'You're not serious.'

'You cured me, doctor, and give or take the usual margins I'm completely sane, more than I probably ever will be again. Damn few people in this world are now, so that makes the obligation on me to act rationally even greater. Well, every ounce of logic tells me that someone's got to make the effort to get rid of the grim menagerie running things now, and Bortman looks like a pretty good start. I intend to drive up to Lake Success and take a shot at him.' He shunted the gear change into second, and added, 'Don't try to have me stopped, doctor, because they'll only dig out our long weekend here.'

As he started to take his foot off the clutch Gregory shouted: 'Christian! You'll never get away with it! They'll catch you anyway!' but the car wrenched forward out of his hand.

Gregory ran through the dust after it, stumbling over half-buried stones, realizing helplessly that when they caught Christian and probed down into the past few months they would soon find the real assassin, an exiled doctor with a three-year-grudge.

'Christian!' he yelled, choking on the white ash. 'Christian, you're insane!'

1962

THE GARDEN OF TIME

Towards evening, when the great shadow of the Palladian villa filled the terrace, Count Axel left his library and walked down the wide marble steps among the time flowers. A tall, imperious figure in a black velvet jacket, a gold tie-pin glinting below his George V beard, cane held stiffly in a white-gloved hand, he surveyed the exquisite crystal flowers without emotion, listening to the sounds of his wife's harpsichord, as she played a Mozart rondo in the music room, echo and vibrate through the translucent petals.

The garden of the villa extended for some two hundred yards below the terrace, sloping down to a miniature lake spanned by a white bridge, a slender pavilion on the opposite bank. Axel rarely ventured as far as the lake; most of the time flowers grew in a small grove just below the terrace, sheltered by the high wall which encircled the estate. From the terrace he could see over the wall to the plain beyond, a continuous expanse of open ground that rolled in great swells to the horizon, where it rose slightly before finally dipping from sight. The plain surrounded the house on all sides, its drab emptiness emphasizing the seclusion and mellowed magnificence of the villa. Here, in the garden, the air seemed brighter, the sun warmer, while the plain was always dull and remote.

As was his custom before beginning his evening stroll, Count Axel looked out across the plain to the final rise, where the horizon was illuminated like a distant stage by the fading sun. As the Mozart chimed delicately around him, flowing from his wife's graceful hands, he saw that the advance column of an enormous army was moving slowly over the horizon. At first glance, the long ranks seemed to be progressing in orderly lines, but on closer inspection, it was apparent that, like the obscured detail of a Goya landscape, the army was composed of a vast throng of people, men and women, interspersed with a few soldiers in ragged uniforms, pressing forward in a disorganized tide. Some laboured under heavy loads suspended from crude yokes around their necks, others struggled with cumbersome wooden carts, their hands wrenching at the wheel spokes, a few trudged on alone, but all moved on at the same pace, bowed backs illuminated in the fleeting sun.

The advancing throng was almost too far away to be visible, but even as Axel watched, his expression aloof yet observant, it came perceptibly nearer, the vanguard of an immense rabble appearing from below the

horizon. At last, as the daylight began to fade, the front edge of the throng reached the crest of the first swell below the horizon, and Axel turned from the terrace and walked down among the time flowers.

The flowers grew to a height of about six feet, their slender stems, like rods of glass, bearing a dozen leaves, the once transparent fronds frosted by the fossilized veins. At the peak of each stem was the time flower, the size of a goblet, the opaque outer petals enclosing the crystal heart. Their diamond brilliance contained a thousand faces, the crystal seeming to drain the air of its light and motion. As the flowers swayed slightly in the evening air, they glowed like flame-tipped spears.

Many of the stems no longer bore flowers, and Axel examined them all carefully, a note of hope now and then crossing his eyes as he searched for any further buds. Finally he selected a large flower on the stem nearest the wall, removed his gloves and with his strong fingers snapped it off.

As he carried the flower back on to the terrace, it began to sparkle and deliquesce, the light trapped within the core at last released. Gradually the crystal dissolved, only the outer petals remaining intact, and the air around Axel became bright and vivid, charged with slanting rays that flared away into the waning sunlight. Strange shifts momentarily transformed the evening, subtly altering its dimensions of time and space. The darkened portico of the house, its patina of age stripped away, loomed with a curious spectral whiteness as if suddenly remembered in a dream.

Raising his head, Axel peered over the wall again. Only the farthest rim of the horizon was lit by the sun, and the great throng, which before had stretched almost a quarter of the way across the plain, had now receded to the horizon, the entire concourse abruptly flung back in a reversal of time, and appeared to be stationary.

The flower in Axel's hand had shrunk to the size of a glass thimble, the petals contracting around the vanishing core. A faint sparkle flickered from the centre and extinguished itself, and Axel felt the flower melt like an ice-cold bead of dew in his hand.

Dusk closed across the house, sweeping its long shadows over the plain, the horizon merging into the sky. The harpsichord was silent, and the time flowers, no longer reflecting its music, stood motionlessly, like an embalmed forest.

For a few minutes Axel looked down at them, counting the flowers which remained, then greeted his wife as she crossed the terrace, her brocade evening dress rustling over the ornamental tiles.

'What a beautiful evening, Axel.' She spoke feelingly, as if she were thanking her husband personally for the great ornate shadow across the lawn and the dark brilliant air. Her face was serene and intelligent, her hair, swept back behind her head into a jewelled clasp, touched with silver. She wore her dress low across her breast, revealing a long slender neck and high chin. Axel surveyed her with fond pride. He gave her his arm and together they walked down the steps into the garden.

'One of the longest evenings this summer,' Axel confirmed, adding: 'I

picked a perfect flower, my dear, a jewel. With luck it should last us for several days.' A frown touched his brow, and he glanced involuntarily at the wall. 'Each time now they seem to come nearer.'

His wife smiled at him encouragingly and held his arm more tightly.

Both of them knew that the time garden was dying.

Three evenings later, as he had estimated (though sooner than he secretly hoped), Count Axel plucked another flower from the time garden.

When he first looked over the wall the approaching rabble filled the distant half of the plain, stretching across the horizon in an unbroken mass. He thought he could hear the low, fragmentary sounds of voices carried across the empty air, a sullen murmur punctuated by cries and shouts, but quickly told himself that he had imagined them. Luckily, his wife was at the harpsichord, and the rich contrapuntal patterns of a Bach fugue cascaded lightly across the terrace, masking any other noises.

Between the house and the horizon the plain was divided into four huge swells, the crest of each one clearly visible in the slanting light. Axel had promised himself that he would never count them, but the number was too small to remain unobserved, particularly when it so obviously marked the progress of the advancing army. By now the forward line had passed the first crest and was well on its way to the second; the main bulk of the throng pressed behind it, hiding the crest and the even vaster concourse spreading from the horizon. Looking to left and right of the central body, Axel could see the apparently limitless extent of the army. What had seemed at first to be the central mass was no more than a minor advance guard, one of many similar arms reaching across the plain. The true centre had not yet emerged, but from the rate of extension Axel estimated that when it finally reached the plain it would completely cover every foot of ground.

Axel searched for any large vehicles or machines, but all was amorphous and uncoordinated as ever. There were no banners or flags, no mascots or pike-bearers. Heads bowed, the multitude pressed on, unaware of the sky.

Suddenly, just before Axel turned away, the forward edge of the throng appeared on top of the second crest, and swarmed down across the plain. What astounded Axel was the incredible distance it had covered while out of sight. The figures were now twice the size, each one clearly within sight.

Quickly, Axel stepped from the terrace, selected a time flower from the garden and tore it from the stem. As it released its compacted light, he returned to the terrace. When the flower had shrunk to a frozen pearl in his palm he looked out at the plain, with relief saw that the army had retreated to the horizon again.

Then he realized that the horizon was much nearer than previously, and that what he assumed to be the horizon was the first crest.

* * *

When he joined the Countess on their evening walk he told her nothing of this, but she could see behind his casual unconcern and did what she could to dispel his worry.

Walking down the steps, she pointed to the time garden. 'What a wonderful display, Axel. There are so many flowers still.'

Axel nodded, smiling to himself at his wife's attempt to reassure him. Her use of 'still' had revealed her own unconscious anticipation of the end. In fact a mere dozen flowers remained of the many hundred that had grown in the garden, and several of these were little more than buds – only three or four were fully grown. As they walked down to the lake, the Countess's dress rustling across the cool turf, he tried to decide whether to pick the larger flowers first or leave them to the end. Strictly, it would be better to give the smaller flowers additional time to grow and mature, and this advantage would be lost if he retained the larger flowers to the end, as he wished to do, for the final repulse. However, he realized that it mattered little either way; the garden would soon die and the smaller flowers required far longer than he could give them to accumulate their compressed cores of time. During his entire lifetime he had failed to notice a single evidence of growth among the flowers. The larger blooms had always been mature, and none of the buds had shown the slightest development.

Crossing the lake, he and his wife looked down at their reflections in the still black water. Shielded by the pavilion on one side and the high garden wall on the other, the villa in the distance, Axel felt composed and secure, the plain with its encroaching multitude a nightmare from which he had safely awakened. He put one arm around his wife's smooth waist and pressed her affectionately to his shoulder, realizing that he had not embraced her for several years, though their lives together had been timeless and he could remember as if yesterday when he first brought her to live in the villa.

'Axel,' his wife asked with sudden seriousness, 'before the garden dies . . . may I pick the last flower?'

Understanding her request, he nodded slowly.

One by one over the succeeding evenings, he picked the remaining flowers, leaving a single small bud which grew just below the terrace for his wife. He took the flowers at random, refusing to count or ration them, plucking two or three of the smaller buds at the same time when necessary. The approaching horde had now reached the second and third crests, a vast concourse of labouring humanity that blotted out the horizon. From the terrace Axel could see clearly the shuffling, straining ranks moving down into the hollow towards the final crest, and occasionally the sounds of their voices carried across to him, interspersed with cries of anger and the cracking of whips. The wooden carts lurched from side to side on tilting wheels, their drivers struggling to control them. As far as Axel could tell, not a single member of the throng was aware of its overall

direction. Rather, each one blindly moved forward across the ground directly below the heels of the person in front of him, and the only unity was that of the cumulative compass. Pointlessly, Axel hoped that the true centre, far below the horizon, might be moving in a different direction, and that gradually the multitude would alter course, swing away from the villa and recede from the plain like a turning tide.

On the last evening but one, as he plucked the time flower, the forward edge of the rabble had reached the third crest, and was swarming past it. While he waited for the Countess, Axel looked at the two flowers left, both small buds which would carry them back through only a few minutes of the next evening. The glass stems of the dead flowers reared up stiffly into the air, but the whole garden had lost its bloom.

Axel passed the next morning quietly in his library, sealing the rarer of his manuscripts into the glass-topped cases between the galleries. He walked slowly down the portrait corridor, polishing each of the pictures carefully, then tidied his desk and locked the door behind him. During the afternoon he busied himself in the drawing rooms, unobtrusively assisting his wife as she cleaned their ornaments and straightened the vases and busts.

By evening, as the sun fell behind the house, they were both tired and dusty, and neither had spoken to the other all day. When his wife moved towards the music-room, Axel called her back.

'Tonight we'll pick the flowers together, my dear,' he said to her evenly. 'One for each of us.'

He peered only briefly over the wall. They could hear, less than half a mile away, the great dull roar of the ragged army, the ring of iron and lash, pressing on towards the house.

Quickly, Axel plucked his flower, a bud no bigger than a sapphire. As it flickered softly, the tumult outside momentarily receded, then began to gather again.

Shutting his ears to the clamour, Axel looked around at the villa, counting the six columns in the portico, then gazed out across the lawn at the silver disc of the lake, its bowl reflecting the last evening light, and at the shadows moving between the tall trees, lengthening across the crisp turf. He lingered over the bridge where he and his wife had stood arm in arm for so many summers –

'*Axel!*'

The tumult outside roared into the air, a thousand voices bellowed only twenty or thirty yards away. A stone flew over the wall and landed among the time flowers, snapping several of the brittle stems. The Countess ran towards him as a further barrage rattled along the wall. Then a heavy tile whirled through the air over their heads and crashed into one of the conservatory windows.

'Axel!' He put his arms around her, straightening his silk cravat when her shoulder brushed it between his lapels.

'Quickly, my dear, the last flower!' He led her down the steps and

through the garden. Taking the stem between her jewelled fingers, she snapped it cleanly, then cradled it within her palms.

For a moment the tumult lessened slightly and Axel collected himself. In the vivid light sparkling from the flower he saw his wife's white, frightened eyes. 'Hold it as long as you can, my dear, until the last grain dies.'

Together they stood on the terrace, the Countess clasping the brilliant dying jewel, the air closing in upon them as the voices outside mounted again. The mob was battering at the heavy iron gates, and the whole villa shook with the impact.

While the final glimmer of light sped away, the Countess raised her palms to the air, as if releasing an invisible bird, then in a final access of courage put her hands in her husband's, her smile as radiant as the vanished flower.

'Oh, Axel!' she cried.

Like a sword, the darkness swooped down across them.

Heaving and swearing, the outer edges of the mob reached the knee-high remains of the wall enclosing the ruined estate, hauled their carts over it and along the dry ruts of what once had been an ornate drive. The ruin, formerly a spacious villa, barely interrupted the ceaseless tide of humanity. The lake was empty, fallen trees rotting at its bottom, an old bridge rusting into it. Weeds flourished among the long grass in the lawn, overrunning the ornamental pathways and carved stone screens.

Much of the terrace had crumbled, and the main section of the mob cut straight across the lawn, by-passing the gutted villa, but one or two of the more curious climbed up and searched among the shell. The doors had rotted from their hinges and the floors had fallen through. In the music-room an ancient harpsichord had been chopped into firewood, but a few keys still lay among the dust. All the books had been toppled from the shelves in the library, the canvases had been slashed, and gilt frames littered the floor.

As the main body of the mob reached the house, it began to cross the wall at all points along its length. Jostled together, the people stumbled into the dry lake, swarmed over the terrace and pressed through the house towards the open doors on the north side.

One area alone withstood the endless wave. Just below the terrace, between the wrecked balcony and the wall, was a dense, six-foot-high growth of heavy thorn-bushes. The barbed foliage formed an impenetrable mass, and the people passing stepped around it carefully, noticing the belladonna entwined among the branches. Most of them were too busy finding their footing among the upturned flagstones to look up into the centre of the thornbushes, where two stone statues stood side by side, gazing out over the grounds from their protected vantage point. The larger of the figures was the effigy of a bearded man in a high-collared jacket, a cane under one arm. Beside him was a woman in an elaborate full-skirted dress, her slim, serene face unmarked by the wind and rain. In her left hand she lightly clasped

a single rose, the delicately formed petals so thin as to be almost transparent.

As the sun died away behind the house a single ray of light glanced through a shattered cornice and struck the rose, reflected off the whorl of petals on to the statues, lighting up the grey stone so that for a fleeting moment it was indistinguishable from the long-vanished flesh of the statues' originals.

1962

THE THOUSAND DREAMS OF STELLAVISTA

No one ever comes to Vermilion Sands now, and I suppose there are few people who have ever heard of it. But ten years ago, when Fay and I first went to live at 99 Stellavista, just before our marriage broke up, the colony was still remembered as the one-time playground of movie stars, delinquent heiresses and eccentric cosmopolites in those fabulous years before the Recess. Admittedly most of the abstract villas and fake palazzos were empty, their huge gardens overgrown, two-level swimming pools long drained, and the whole place was degenerating like an abandoned amusement park, but there was enough bizarre extravagance in the air to make one realize that the giants had only just departed.

I remember the day we first drove down Stellavista in the property agent's car, and how exhilarated Fay and I were, despite our bogus front of bourgeois respectability. Fay, I think, was even a little awed – one or two of the big names were living on behind the shuttered terraces – and we must have been the easiest prospects the young agent had seen for months.

Presumably this was why he tried to work off the really weird places first. The half dozen we saw to begin with were obviously the old regulars, faithfully paraded in the hope that some unwary client might be staggered into buying one of them, or failing that, temporarily lose all standards of comparison and take the first tolerably conventional pile to come along.

One, just off Stellavista and M, would have shaken even an old-guard surrealist on a heroin swing. Screened from the road by a mass of dusty rhododendrons, it consisted of six aluminium-shelled spheres suspended like the elements of a mobile from an enormous concrete davit. The largest sphere contained the lounge, the others, successively smaller and spiralling upwards into the air, the bedrooms and kitchen. Many of the hull plates had been holed, and the entire slightly tarnished structure hung down into the weeds poking through the cracked concrete court like a collection of forgotten spaceships in a vacant lot.

Stamers, the agent, left us sitting in the car, partly shielded by the rhododendrons. He ran across to the entrance and switched the place on (all the houses in Vermilion Sands, it goes without saying, were psychotropic). There was a dim whirring, and the spheres tipped and began to rotate, brushing against the undergrowth.

Fay sat in the car, staring up in amazement at this awful, beautiful thing, but out of curiosity I got out and walked over to the entrance, the main sphere slowing as I approached, uncertainly steering a course towards me, the smaller ones following.

According to the descriptive brochure, the house had been built eight years earlier for a TV mogul as a weekend retreat. The pedigree was a long one, through two movie starlets, a psychiatrist, an ultrasonic composer (the late Dmitri Shochmann – a notorious madman. I remembered that he had invited a score of guests to his suicide party, but no one had turned up to watch. Chagrined, he bungled the attempt.) and an automobile stylist. With such an overlay of more or less blue-chip responses built into it, the house should have been snapped up within a week, even in Vermilion Sands. To have been on the market for several months, if not years, indicated that the previous tenants had been none too happy there.

Ten feet from me, the main sphere hovered uncertainly, the entrance extending downwards. Stamers stood in the open doorway, smiling encouragingly, but the house seemed nervous of something. As I stepped forward it suddenly jerked away, almost in alarm, the entrance retracting and sending a low shudder through the rest of the spheres.

It's always interesting to watch a psychotropic house try to adjust itself to strangers, particularly those at all guarded or suspicious. The responses vary, a blend of past reactions to negative emotions, the hostility of the previous tenants, a traumatic encounter with a bailiff or burglar (though both these usually stay well away from PT houses; the dangers of an inverting balcony or the sudden deflatus of a corridor are too great). The initial reaction can be a surer indication of a house's true condition than any amount of sales talk about horsepower and moduli of elasticity.

This one was definitely on the defensive. When I climbed on to the entrance Stamers was fiddling desperately with the control console recessed into the wall behind the door, damping the volume down as low as possible. Usually a property agent will select medium/full, trying to heighten the PT responses.

He smiled thinly at me. 'Circuits are a little worn. Nothing serious, we'll replace them on contract. Some of the previous owners were showbusiness people, had an over-simplified view of the full life.

I nodded, walking on to the balcony which ringed the wide sunken lounge. It was a beautiful room all right, with opaque plastex walls and white fluo-glass ceiling, but something terrible had happened there. As it responded to me, the ceiling lifted slightly and the walls grew less opaque, reflecting my perspective-seeking eye. I noticed that curious mottled knots were forming where the room had been strained and healed faultily. Hidden rifts began to distort the sphere, ballooning out one of the alcoves like a bubble of over-extended gum.

Stamers tapped my elbow.

'Lively responses, aren't they, Mr Talbot?' He put his hand on the

wall behind us. The plastex swam and whirled like boiling toothpaste, then extruded itself into a small ledge. Stamers sat down on the lip, which quickly expanded to match the contours of his body, providing back and arm rests. 'Sit down and relax, Mr Talbot, let yourself feel at home here.'

The seat cushioned up around me like an enormous white hand, and immediately the walls and ceiling quietened – obviously Stamers's first job was to get his clients off their feet before their restless shuffling could do any damage. Someone living there must have put in a lot of anguished pacing and knuckle-cracking.

'Of course, you're getting nothing but custom-built units here,' Stamers said. 'The vinyl chains in this plastex were hand-crafted literally molecule by molecule.'

I felt the room shift around me. The ceiling was dilating and contracting in steady pulses, an absurdly exaggerated response to our own respiratory rhythms, but the motions were overlayed by sharp transverse spasms, feed-back from some cardiac ailment.

The house was not only frightened of us, it was seriously ill. Somebody, Dmitri Shochmann perhaps, overflowing with self-hate, had committed an appalling injury to himself, and the house was recapitulating its previous response. I was about to ask Stamers if the suicide party had been staged here when he sat up and looked around fretfully.

At the same time my ears started to sing. Mysteriously, the air pressure inside the lounge was building up, gusts of old grit whirling out into the hallway towards the exit.

Stamers was on his feet, the seat telescoping back into the wall.

'Er, Mr Talbot, let's stroll around the garden, give you the feel of –'

He broke off, face creased in alarm. The ceiling was only five feet above our heads, contracting like a huge white bladder.

'– explosive decompression,' Stamers finished automatically, taking my arm. 'I don't understand this,' he muttered as we ran out into the hallway, the air whooshing past us.

I had a shrewd idea what was happening, and sure enough we found Fay peering into the control console, swinging the volume tabs.

Stamers dived past her. We were almost dragged back into the lounge as the ceiling began its outward leg and sucked the air in through the doorway. He reached the emergency panel and switched the house off.

Wide-eyed, he buttoned his shirt. 'That was close, Mrs Talbot, really close.' He gave a light hysterical laugh.

As we walked back to the car, the giant spheres resting among the weeds, he said: 'Well, Mr Talbot, it's a fine property. A remarkable pedigree for a house only eight years old. An exciting challenge, you know, a new dimension in living.'

I gave him a weak smile. 'Maybe, but it's not exactly *us*, is it?'

* * *

We had come to Vermilion Sands for two years, while I opened a law office in downtown Red Beach twenty miles away. Apart from the dust, smog and inflationary prices of real estate in Red Beach, a strong motive for coming out to Vermilion Sands was that any number of potential clients were mouldering away there in the old mansions – forgotten movie queens, lonely impresarios and the like, some of the most litigious people in the world. Once installed, I could make my rounds of the bridge tables and dinner parties, tactfully stimulating a little righteous will-paring and contract-breaking.

However, as we drove down Stellavista on our inspection tour I wondered if we'd find anywhere suitable. Rapidly we went through a mock Assyrian ziggurat (the last owner had suffered from St Vitus's Dance, and the whole structure still jittered like a galvanized Tower of Pisa), and a converted submarine pen (here the problem had been alcoholism, we could *feel* the gloom and helplessness come down off those huge damp walls).

Finally Stamers gave up and brought us back to earth. Unfortunately his more conventional properties were little better. The real trouble was that most of Vermilion Sands is composed of early, or primitive-fantastic psychotropic, when the possibilities offered by the new bio-plastic medium rather went to architects' heads. It was some years before a compromise was reached between the one hundred per cent responsive structive and the rigid non-responsive houses of the past. The first PT houses had so many senso-cells distributed over them, echoing every shift of mood and position of the occupants, that living in one was like inhabiting someone else's brain.

Unluckily bioplastics need a lot of exercise or they grow rigid and crack, and many people believe that PT buildings are still given unnecessarily subtle memories and are far too sensitive – there's the apocryphal story of the millionaire of plebian origins who was literally frozen out of a million-dollar mansion he had bought from an aristocratic family. The place had been trained to respond to their habitual rudeness and bad temper, and reacted discordantly when readjusting itself to the millionaire, unintentionally parodying his soft-spoken politeness.

But although the echoes of previous tenants can be intrusive, this naturally has its advantages. Many medium-priced PT homes resonate with the bygone laughter of happy families, the relaxed harmony of a successful marriage. It was something like this that I wanted for Fay and myself. In the previous year our relationship had begun to fade a little, and a really well-integrated house with a healthy set of reflexes – say, those of a prosperous bank president and his devoted spouse – would go a long way towards healing the rifts between us.

Leafing through the brochures when we reached the end of Stellavista I could see that domesticated bank presidents had been in short supply

at Vermilion Sands. The pedigrees were either packed with ulcer-ridden, quadri-divorced TV executives, or discreetly blank.

99 Stellavista was in the latter category. As we climbed out of the car and walked up the short drive I searched the pedigree for data on the past tenants, but only the original owner was given: a Miss Emma Slack, psychic orientation unstated.

That it was a woman's house was obvious. Shaped like an enormous orchid, it was set back on a low concrete dais in the centre of a blue gravel court. The white plastex wings, which carried the lounge on one side and the master bedroom on the other, spanned out across the magnolias on the far side of the drive. Between the two wings, on the first floor, was an open terrace around a heart-shaped swimming pool. The terrace ran back to the central bulb, a three-storey segment containing the chauffeur's apartment and a vast two-decker kitchen.

The house seemed to be in good condition. The plastex was unscarred, its thin seams running smoothly to the far rim like the veins of a giant leaf.

Curiously, Stamers was in no hurry to switch on. He pointed to left and right as we made our way up the glass staircase to the terrace, underlining various attractive features, but made no effort to find the control console, and suspected that the house might be a static conversion – a fair number of PT houses are frozen in one or other position at the end of their working lives, and make tolerable static homes.

'It's not bad,' I admitted, looking across the powder-blue water as Stamers piled on the superlatives. Through the glass bottom of the pool the car parked below loomed like a coloured whale asleep on the ocean bed. 'This is the sort of thing, all right. But what about switching it on?'

Stamers stepped around me and headed after Fay. 'You'll want to see the kitchen first, Mr Talbot. There's no hurry, let yourself feel at home here.'

The kitchen was fabulous, banks of gleaming control panels and auto units. Everything was recessed and stylized, blending into the overall colour scheme, complex gadgets folding back into self-sealing cabinets. Boiling an egg there would have taken me a couple of days.

'Quite a plant,' I commented. Fay wandered around in a daze of delight, automatically fingering the chrome. 'Looks as if it's tooled up to produce penicillin.' I tapped the brochure. 'But why so cheap? At twenty-five thousand it's damn nearly being given away.'

Stamers's eyes brightened. He flashed me a broad conspiratorial smile which indicated that this was *my* year, *my* day. Taking me off on a tour of the rumpus room and library, he began to hammer home the merits of the house, extolling his company's thirty-five-year, easy-purchase plan (they wanted anything except cash – there was no money in that) and the beauty and simplicity of the garden (mostly flexible polyurethane perennials).

Finally, apparently convinced that I was sold, he switched the house on.

I didn't know then what it was, but something strange had taken place in that house. Emma Slack had certainly been a woman with a powerful and oblique personality. As I walked slowly around the empty lounge, feeling the walls angle and edge away, doorways widen when I approached, curious echoes stirred through the memories embedded in the house. The responses were undefined, but somehow eerie and unsettling, like being continually watched over one's shoulder, each room adjusting itself to my soft, random footsteps as if they contained the possibility of some explosive burst of passion or temperament.

Inclining my head, I seemed to hear other echoes, delicate and feminine, a graceful swirl of movement reflected in a brief, fluid sweep in one corner, the decorous unfolding of an archway or recess.

Then, abruptly, the mood would invert, and the hollow eeriness return.

Fay touched my arm. 'Howard, it's strange.'

I shrugged. 'Interesting, though. Remember, our own responses will overlay these within a few days.'

Fay shook her head. 'I couldn't stand it, Howard. Mr Stamers must have something normal.'

'Darling, Vermilion Sands is Vermilion Sands. Don't expect to find the suburban norms. People here were individualists.'

I looked down at Fay. Her small oval face, with its childlike mouth and chin, the fringe of blonde hair and pert nose, seemed lost and anxious.

I put my arm around her shoulder. 'Okay, sweetie, you're quite right. Let's find somewhere we can put our feet up and relax. Now, what are we going to say to Stamers?'

Surprisingly, Stamers didn't seem all that disappointed. When I shook my head he put up a token protest but soon gave in and switched off the house.

'I know how Mrs Talbot feels,' he conceded as we went down the staircase. 'Some of these places have got too much personality built into them. Living with someone like Gloria Tremayne isn't too easy.'

I stopped, two steps from the bottom, a curious ripple of recognition running through my mind.

'Gloria Tremayne? I thought the only owner was a Miss Emma Slack.'

Stamers nodded. 'Yes. Gloria Tremayne. Emma Slack was her real name. Don't say I told you, though everybody living around here knows it. We keep it quiet as long as we can. If we said Gloria Tremayne no one would even look at the place.'

'Gloria Tremayne,' Fay repeated, puzzled. 'She was the movie star who shot her husband, wasn't she? He was a famous architect – Howard, weren't you on that case?'

As Fay's voice chattered on I turned and looked up the staircase towards the sun-lounge, my mind casting itself back ten years to one of the most famous trials of the decade, whose course and verdict were as much as anything else to mark the end of a whole generation, and show up the irresponsibilities of the world before the Recess. Even though Gloria Tremayne had been acquitted, everyone knew that she had cold-bloodedly murdered her husband, the architect Miles Vanden Starr. Only the silver-tongued pleading of Daniel Hammett, her defence attorney, assisted by a young man called Howard Talbot, had saved her. I said to Fay, 'Yes, I helped to defend her. It seems a long time ago. Angel, wait in the car. I want to check something.'

Before she could follow me I ran up the staircase on to the terrace and closed the glass double doors behind me. Inert and unresponsive now, the white walls rose into the sky on either side of the pool. The water was motionless, a transparent block of condensed time, through which I could see the drowned images of Fay and Stamers sitting in the car, like an embalmed fragment of my future.

For three weeks, during her trial ten years earlier, I sat only a few feet from Gloria Tremayne, and like everyone else in that crowded courtroom I would never forget her mask-like face, the composed eyes that examined each of the witnesses as they gave their testimony – chauffeur, police surgeon, neighbours who heard the shots – like a brilliant spider arraigned by its victims, never once showing any emotion or response. As they dismembered her web, skein by skein, she sat impassively at its centre, giving Hammett no encouragement, content to repose in the image of herself ('The Ice Face') projected across the globe for the previous fifteen years.

Perhaps in the end this saved her. The jury were unable to outstare the enigma. To be honest, by the last week of the trial I had lost all interest in it. As I steered Hammett through his brief, opening and shutting his red wooden suitcase (the Hammett hallmark, it was an excellent jury distractor) whenever he indicated, my attention was fixed completely on Gloria Tremayne, trying to find some flaw in the mask through which I could glimpse her personality. I suppose that I was just another naive young man who had fallen in love with a myth manufactured by a thousand publicity agents, but for me the sensation was the real thing, and when she was acquitted the world began to revolve again.

That justice had been flouted mattered nothing. Hammett, curiously, believed her innocent. Like many successful lawyers he had based his career on the principle of prosecuting the guilty and defending the innocent – this way he was sure of a sufficiently high proportion of successes to give him a reputation for being brilliant and unbeatable. When he defended Gloria Tremayne most lawyers thought he had been tempted to depart from principle by a fat bribe from her studio, but in

fact he volunteered to take the case. Perhaps he, too, was working off a secret infatuation.

Of course, I never saw her again. As soon as her next picture had been safely released her studio dropped her. Later she briefly reappeared on a narcotics charge after a car smash, and then disappeared into a limbo of alcoholics hospitals and psychiatric wards. When she died five years afterwards few newspapers gave her more than a couple of lines.

Below, Stamers sounded the horn. Leisurely I retraced my way through the lounge and bedrooms, scanning the empty floors, running my hands over the smooth plastex walls, bracing myself to feel again the impact of Gloria Tremayne's personality. Blissfully, her presence would be everywhere in the house, a thousand echoes of her distilled into every matrix and senso-cell, each moment of emotion blended into a replica more intimate than anyone, apart from her dead husband, could ever know. The Gloria Tremayne with whom I had become infatuated had ceased to exist, but this house was the shrine that entombed the very signatures of her soul.

To begin with everything went quietly. Fay remonstrated with me, but I promised her a new mink wrap out of the savings we made on the house. Secondly, I was careful to keep the volume down for the first few weeks, so that there would be no clash of feminine wills. A major problem of psychotropic houses is that after several months one has to increase the volume to get the same image of the last owner, and this increases the sensitivity of the memory cells and their rate of contamination. At the same time, magnifying the psychic underlay emphasizes the cruder emotional ground-base. One begins to taste the lees rather than the distilled cream of the previous tenancy. I wanted to savour the quintessence of Gloria Tremayne as long as possible so I deliberately rationed myself, turning the volume down during the day while I was out, then switching on only those rooms in which I sat in the evenings.

Right from the outset I was neglecting Fay. Not only were we both preoccupied with the usual problems of adjustment faced by every married couple moving into a new house – undressing in the master bedroom that first night was a positive honeymoon debut all over again – but I was completely immersed in the exhilarating persona of Gloria Tremayne, exploring every alcove and niche in search of her.

In the evenings I sat in the library, feeling her around me in the stirring walls, hovering nearby as I emptied the packing cases like an attendant succubus. Sipping my scotch while night closed over the dark blue pool, I carefully analysed her personality, deliberately varying my moods to evoke as wide a range of responses. The memory cells in the house were perfectly bonded, never revealing any flaws of character, always reposed and self-controlled. If I leapt out of my chair and switched the stereogram abruptly from Stravinsky to Stan Kenton to the MJQ, the room adjusted its mood and tempo without effort.

And yet how long was it before I discovered that there was another personality present in that house, and began to feel the curious eeriness Fay and I had noticed as soon as Stamers switched the house on? Not for a few weeks, when the house was still responding to my star-struck idealism. While my devotion to the departed spirit of Gloria Tremayne was the dominant mood, the house played itself back accordingly, recapitulating only the more serene aspects of Gloria Tremayne's character.

Soon, however, the mirror was to darken.

It was Fay who broke the spell. She quickly realized that the initial responses were being overlaid by others from a more mellow and, from her point of view, more dangerous quarter of the past. After doing her best to put up with them she made a few guarded attempts to freeze Gloria out, switching the volume controls up and down, selecting the maximum of bass lift – which stressed the masculine responses – and the minimum of alto lift.

One morning I caught her on her knees by the console, poking a screwdriver at the memory drum, apparently in an effort to erase the entire store.

Taking it from her, I locked the unit and hooked the key on to my chain.

'Darling, the mortgage company could sue us for destroying the pedigree. Without it this house would be valueless. What are you trying to do?'

Fay dusted her hands on her skirt and stared me straight in the eye, chin jutting.

'I'm trying to restore a little sanity here and if possible, find my own marriage again. I thought it might be in there somewhere.'

I put my arm around her and steered her back towards the kitchen. 'Darling, you're getting over-intuitive again. Just relax, don't try to upset everything.'

'Upset –? Howard, what are you talking about? Haven't I a right to my own husband? I'm sick of sharing him with a homicidal neurotic who died five years ago. It's positively ghoulish!'

I winced as she snapped this out, feeling the walls in the hallway darken and retreat defensively. The air became clouded and frenetic, like a dull storm-filled day.

'Fay, you know your talent for exaggeration . . .' I searched around for the kitchen, momentarily disoriented as the corridor walls shifted and backed. 'You don't know how lucky you –'

I didn't get any further before she interrupted. Within five seconds we were in the middle of a blistering row. Fay threw all caution to the winds, deliberately, I think, in the hope of damaging the house permanently, while I stupidly let a lot of my unconscious resentment towards her come out. Finally she stormed away into her bedroom and I stamped into the shattered lounge and slumped down angrily on the sofa.

* * *

Above me the ceiling flexed and quivered, the colour of roof slates, here and there mottled by angry veins that bunched the walls in on each other. The air pressure mounted but I felt too tired to open a window and sat stewing in a pit of black anger.

It must have been then that I recognized the presence of Miles Vanden Starr. All echoes of Gloria Tremayne's personality had vanished, and for the first time since moving in I had recovered my normal perspectives. The mood of anger and resentment in the lounge was remarkably persistent, far longer than expected from what had been little more than a tiff. The walls continued to pulse and knot for over half an hour, long after my own irritation had faded and I was sitting up and examining the room clear-headedly.

The anger, deep and frustrated, was obviously masculine. I assumed, correctly, that the original source had been Vanden Starr, who had designed the house for Gloria Tremayne and lived there for over a year before his death. To have so grooved the memory drum meant that this atmosphere of blind, neurotic hostility had been maintained for most of that time.

As the resentment slowly dispersed I could see that for the time being Fay had succeeded in her object. The serene persona of Gloria Tremayne had vanished. The feminine motif was still there, in a higher and shriller key, but the dominant presence was distinctly Vanden Starr's. This new mood of the house reminded me of the courtroom photographs of him; glowering out of 1950-ish groups with Le Corbusier and Lloyd Wright, stalking about some housing project in Chicago or Tokyo like a petty dictator, heavy-jowled, thyroidal, with large lustreless eyes, and then the Vermilion Sands: 1970 shots of him, fitting into the movie colony like a shark into a goldfish bowl.

However, there was power behind those baleful drives. Cued in by our tantrum, the presence of Vanden Starr had descended upon 99 Stellavista like a thundercloud. At first I tried to recapture the earlier halcyon mood, but this had disappeared and my irritation at losing it only served to inflate the thundercloud. An unfortunate aspect of psychotropic houses is the factor of resonance – diametrically opposed personalities soon stabilize their relationship, the echo inevitably yielding to the new source. But where the personalities are of similar frequency and amplitude they mutually reinforce themselves, each adapting itself for comfort to the personality of the other. All too soon I began to assume the character of Vanden Starr, and my increased exasperation with Fay merely drew from the house a harder front of antagonism.

Later I knew that I was, in fact, treating Fay in exactly the way that Vanden Starr had treated Gloria Tremayne, recapitulating the steps of their tragedy with consequences that were equally disastrous.

Fay recognized the changed mood of the house immediately. 'What's happened to our lodger?' she gibed at dinner the next evening. 'Our

beautiful ghost seems to be spurning you. Is the spirit unwilling although the flesh is weak?'

'God knows,' I growled testily. 'I think you've really messed the place up.' I glanced around the dining room for any echo of Gloria Tremayne, but she had gone. Fay went out to the kitchen and I sat over my half-eaten hors d'oeuvres, staring at it blankly, when I felt a curious ripple in the wall behind me, a silver dart of movement that vanished as soon as I looked up. I tried to focus it without success, the first echo of Gloria since our row, but later that evening, when I went into Fay's bedroom after I heard her crying, I noticed it again.

Fay had gone into the bathroom. As I was about to find her I felt the same echo of feminine anguish. It had been prompted by Fay's tears, but like Vanden Starr's mood set off by my own anger, it persisted long after the original cue. I followed it into the corridor as it faded out of the room but it diffused outwards into the ceiling and hung there motionlessly.

Starting to walk down to the lounge, I realized that the house was watching me like a wounded animal.

Two days later came the attack on Fay.

I had just returned home from the office, childishly annoyed with Fay for parking her car on my side of the garage. In the cloakroom I tried to check my anger; the senso-cells had picked up the cue and began to suck the irritation out of me, pouring it back into the air until the walls of the cloakroom darkened and seethed.

I shouted some gratuitous insult at Fay, who was in the lounge. A second later she screamed: 'Howard! Quickly!'

Running towards the lounge, I flung myself at the door, expecting it to retract. Instead, it remained rigid, frame locked in the archway. The entire house seemed grey and strained, the pool outside like a tank of cold lead.

Fay shouted again. I seized the metal handle of the manual control and wrenched the door back.

Fay was almost out of sight, on one of the slab sofas in the centre of the room, buried beneath the sagging canopy of the ceiling which had collapsed on to her. The heavy plastex had flowed together directly above her head, forming a blob a yard in diameter.

Raising the flaccid plastex with my hands, I managed to lift it off Fay, who was spread-eagled into the cushions with only her feet protruding. She wriggled out and flung her arms around me, sobbing noiselessly.

'Howard, this house is insane, I think it's trying to kill me!'

'For heaven's sake, Fay, don't be silly. It was simply a freak accumulation of senso-cells. Your breathing probably set it off.' I patted her shoulder, remembering the child I had married a few years earlier. Smiling to myself, I watched the ceiling retract slowly, the walls grow lighter in tone.

'Howard, can't we leave here?' Fay babbled. 'Let's go and live in a static house. I know it's dull, but what does it matter –?'

'Well,' I said, 'it's not just dull, it's dead. Don't worry, angel, you'll learn to like it here.'

Fay twisted away from me. 'Howard, I can't stay in this house any more. You've been so preoccupied recently, you're completely changed.' She started to cry again, and pointed at the ceiling. 'If I hadn't been lying down, do you realize it would have killed me?'

I dusted the end of the sofa. 'Yes, I can see your heel marks.' Irritation welled up like bile before I could stop it. 'I thought I told you not to stretch out here. This isn't a beach, Fay. You know it annoys me.'

Around us the walls began to mottle and cloud again.

Why did Fay anger me so easily? Was it, as I assumed at the time, unconscious resentment that egged me on, or was I merely a vehicle for the antagonism which had accumulated during Vanden Starr's marriage to Gloria Tremayne and was now venting itself on the hapless couple who followed them to 99 Stellavista? Perhaps I'm over-charitable to myself in assuming the latter, but Fay and I had been tolerably happy during our five years of marriage, and I am sure my nostalgic infatuation for Gloria Tremayne couldn't have so swept me off my feet.

Either way, however, Fay didn't wait for a second attempt. Two days later I came home to find a fresh tape on the kitchen memophone. I switched it on to hear her tell me that she could no longer put up with me, my nagging or 99 Stellavista and was going back east to stay with her sister.

Callously, my first reaction, after the initial twinge of indignation, was sheer relief. I still believed that Fay was responsible for Gloria Tremayne's eclipse and the emergence of Vanden Starr, and that with her gone I would recapture the early days of idyll and romance.

I was only partly right. Gloria Tremayne did return, but not in the role expected. I, who had helped to defend her at her trial, should have known better.

A few days after Fay left I became aware that the house had taken on a separate existence, its coded memories discharging themselves independently of my own behaviour. Often when I returned in the evening, eager to relax over half a decanter of scotch, I would find the ghosts of Miles Vanden Starr and Gloria Tremayne in full flight. Starr's black and menacing personality crowded after the tenuous but increasingly resilient quintessence of his wife. This rapier-like resistance could be observed literally – the walls of the lounge would stiffen and darken in a vortex of anger that converged upon a small zone of lightness hiding in one of the alcoves, as if to obliterate its presence, but at the last moment Gloria's persona would flit nimbly away, leaving the room to seethe and writhe.

Fay had set off this spirit of resistance, and I visualized Gloria Tremayne going through a similar period of living hell. As her personality re-emerged in its new role I watched it carefully, volume at maximum despite the damage the house might do to itself. Once Stamers stopped by and offered to get the circuits checked for me. He had seen the house from the road, flexing and changing colour like an anguished squid. Thanking him, I made up some excuse and declined. Later he told me that I had kicked him out unceremoniously – apparently he hardly recognized me; I was striding around the dark quaking house like a madman in an Elizabethan horror tragedy, oblivious of everything.

Although submerged by the personality of Miles Vanden Starr, I gradually realized that Gloria Tremayne had been deliberately driven out of her mind by him. What had prompted his implacable hostility I can only hazard – perhaps he resented her success, perhaps she had been unfaithful to him. When she finally retaliated and shot him it was, I'm sure, an act of self-defence.

Two months after she went east Fay filed a divorce suit against me. Frantically I telephoned her, explaining that I would be grateful if she postponed the action as the publicity would probably kill my new law office. However, Fay was adamant. What annoyed me most was that she sounded better than she had done for years, really happy again. When I pleaded with her she said she needed the divorce in order to marry again, and then, as a last straw, refused to tell me who the man was.

By the time I slammed the phone down my temper was taking off like a lunar probe. I left the office early and began a tour of the bars in Red Beach, working my way slowly back to Vermilion Sands. I hit 99 Stellavista like a one-man task force, mowing down most of the magnolias in the drive, ramming the car into the garage on the third pass after wrecking both auto-doors.

My keys jammed in the door lock and I finally had to kick my way through one of the glass panels. Raging upstairs on to the darkened terrace I flung my hat and coat into the pool and slammed into the lounge. By 2 a.m., as I mixed myself a nightcap at the bar and put the last act of *Götterdämmerung* on the stereogram, the whole place was really warming up.

On the way to bed I lurched into Fay's room to see what damage I could do to the memories I still retained of her, kicked in a wardrobe and booted the mattress on to the floor, turning the walls literally blue with a salvo of epithets.

Shortly after three o'clock I fell asleep, the house revolving around me like an enormous turntable.

It must have been only four o'clock when I woke, conscious of a curious silence in the darkened room. I was stretched across the bed, one hand around the neck of the decanter, the other holding a dead cigar stub.

The walls were motionless, unstirred by even the residual eddies which drift through a psychotropic house when the occupants are asleep.

Something had altered the normal perspectives of the room. Trying to focus on the grey underswell of the ceiling, I listened for footsteps outside. Sure enough, the corridor wall began to retract. The archway, usually a six-inch wide slit, rose to admit someone. Nothing came through, but the room expanded to accommodate an additional presence, the ceiling ballooning upwards. Astounded, I tried not to move my head, watching the unoccupied pressure zone move quickly across the room towards the bed, its motion shadowed by a small dome in the ceiling.

The pressure zone paused at the foot of the bed and hesitated for a few seconds. But instead of stabilizing, the walls began to vibrate rapidly, quivering with strange uncertain tremors, radiating a sensation of acute urgency and indecision.

Then, abruptly, the room stilled. A second later, as I lifted myself up on one elbow, a violent spasm convulsed the room, buckling the walls and lifting the bed off the floor. The entire house started to shake and writhe. Gripped by this seizure, the bedroom contracted and expanded like the chamber of a dying heart, the ceiling rising and falling.

I steadied myself on the swinging bed and gradually the convulsion died away, the walls realigning. I stood up, wondering what insane crisis this psychotropic *grand mal* duplicated.

The room was in darkness, thin moonlight coming through the trio of small circular vents behind the bed. These were contracting as the walls closed in on each other. Pressing my hands against the ceiling, I felt it push downwards strongly. The edges of the floor were blending into the walls as the room converted itself into a sphere.

The air pressure mounted. I tumbled over to the vents, reached them as they clamped around my fists, air whistling through my fingers. Face against the openings, I gulped in the cool night air, and tried to force apart the locking plastex.

The safety cut-out switch was above the door on the other side of the room. I dived across to it, clambering over the tilting bed, but the flowing plastex had submerged the whole unit.

Head bent to avoid the ceiling, I pulled off my tie, gasping at the thudding air. Trapped in the room, I was suffocating as it duplicated the expiring breaths of Vanden Starr after he had been shot. The tremendous spasm had been his convulsive reaction as the bullet from Gloria Tremayne's gun crashed into his chest.

I fumbled in my pockets for a knife, felt my cigarette lighter, pulled it out and flicked it on. The room was now a grey sphere ten feet in diameter. Thick veins, as broad as my arm, were knotting across its surface, crushing the endboards of the bedstead.

I raised the lighter to the surface of the ceiling, and let it play across the opaque fluoglass. Immediately it began to fizz and bubble. It flared alight

and split apart, the two burning lips unzipping in a brilliant discharge of heat.

As the cocoon bisected itself, I could see the twisted mouth of the corridor bending into the room below the sagging outline of the dining room ceiling. Feet skating in the molten plastex, I pulled myself up on to the corridor. The whole house seemed to have been ruptured. Walls were buckled, floors furling at their edges. Water was pouring out of the pool as the unit tipped forwards on the weakened foundations. The glass slabs of the staircase had been shattered, the razor-like teeth jutting from the wall.

I ran into Fay's bedroom, found the cut-out switch and stabbed the sprinkler alarm.

The house was still throbbing, but a moment later it locked and became rigid. I leaned against the dented wall and let the spray pour across my face from the sprinkler jets.

Around me, its wings torn and disarrayed, the house reared up like a tortured flower.

Standing in the trampled flower beds, Stamers gazed at the house, an expression of awe and bewilderment on his face. It was just after six o'clock. The last of the three police cars had driven away, the lieutenant in charge finally conceding defeat. 'Dammit, I can't arrest a house for attempted homicide, can I?' he'd asked me somewhat belligerently. I roared with laughter at this, my initial feelings of shock having given way to an almost hysterical sense of fun.

Stamers found me equally difficult to understand.

'What on earth were you doing in there?' he asked, voice down to a whisper.

'Nothing. I tell you I was fast asleep. And relax. The house can't hear you. It's switched off.'

We wandered across the churned gravel and waded through the water which lay like a black mirror. Stamers shook his head.

'The place must have been insane. If you ask me it needs a psychiatrist to straighten it out.'

'You're right,' I told him. 'In fact, that was exactly my role – to reconstruct the original traumatic situation and release the repressed material.'

'Why joke about it? It tried to kill you.'

'Don't be absurd. The real culprit is Vanden Starr. But as the lieutenant implied, you can't arrest a man who's been dead for ten years. It was the pent-up memory of his death which tried to kill me. Even if Gloria Tremayne was driven to pulling the trigger, Starr pointed the gun. Believe me, I lived out his role for a couple of months. What worries me is that if Fay hadn't had enough good sense to leave she might have been hypnotized by the persona of Gloria Tremayne into killing *me*.'

* * *

Much to Stamers's surprise, I decided to stay on at 99 Stellavista. Apart from the fact that I hadn't enough cash to buy another place, the house had certain undeniable memories for me that I didn't want to forsake. Gloria Tremayne was still there, and I was sure that Vanden Starr had at last gone. The kitchen and service units were still functional, and apart from their contorted shapes most of the rooms were habitable. In addition I needed a rest, and nothing is so quiet as a static house.

Of course, in its present form 99 Stellavista can hardly be regarded as a typical static dwelling. Yet, the deformed rooms and twisted corridors have as much personality as any psychotropic house. The PT unit is still working and one day I shall switch it on again. But one thing worries me. The violent spasms which ruptured the house may in some way have damaged Gloria Tremayne's personality. To live with it might well be madness for me, as there's a subtle charm about the house even in its distorted form, like the ambiguous smile of a beautiful but insane woman.

Often I unlock the control console and examine the memory drum. Her personality, whatever it may be, is there. Nothing would be simpler than to erase it. But I can't.

One day soon, whatever the outcome, I know that I shall have to switch the house on again.

1962

THIRTEEN TO CENTAURUS

Abel knew.

Three months earlier, just after his sixteenth birthday, he had guessed, but had been too unsure of himself, too overwhelmed by the logic of his discovery, to mention it to his parents. At times, lying back half asleep in his bunk while his mother crooned one of the old lays to herself, he would deliberately repress the knowledge, but always it came back, nagging at him insistently, forcing him to jettison most of what he had long regarded as the real world.

None of the other children at the Station could help. They were immersed in their games in Playroom, or chewing pencils over their tests and homework.

'Abel, what's the matter?' Zenna Peters called after him as he wandered off to the empty store-room on D-Deck. 'You're looking sad again.'

Abel hesitated, watching Zenna's warm, puzzled smile, then slipped his hands into his pockets and made off, springing down the metal stairway to make sure she didn't follow him. Once she sneaked into the store-room uninvited and he had pulled the light-bulb out of the socket, shattered about three weeks of conditioning. Dr Francis had been furious.

As he hurried along the D-Deck corridor he listened carefully for the doctor, who had recently been keeping an eye on Abel, watching him shrewdly from behind the plastic models in Playroom. Perhaps Abel's mother had told him about the nightmare, when he would wake from a vice of sweating terror, an image of a dull burning disc fixed before his eyes.

If only Dr Francis could cure him of that dream.

Every six yards down the corridor he stepped through a bulkhead, and idly touched the heavy control boxes on either side of the doorway. Deliberately unfocusing his mind, Abel identified some of the letters above the switches

M–T—R SC—N

but they scrambled into a blur as soon as he tried to read the entire phrase. Conditioning was too strong. After he trapped her in the store-room Zenna had been able to read a few of the notices, but Dr Francis whisked

her away before she could repeat them. Hours later, when she came back, she remembered nothing.

As usual when he entered the store-room, he waited a few seconds before switching on the light, seeing in front of him the small disc of burning light that in his dreams expanded until it filled his brain like a thousand arc lights. It seemed endlessly distant, yet somehow mysteriously potent and magnetic, arousing dormant areas of his mind close to those which responded to his mother's presence.

As the disc began to expand he pressed the switch tab.

To his surprise, the room remained in darkness. He fumbled for the switch, a short cry slipping involuntarily through his lips.

Abruptly, the light went on.

'Hello, Abel,' Dr Francis said easily, right hand pressing the bulb into its socket. 'Quite a shock, that one.' He leaned against a metal crate. 'I thought we'd have a talk together about your essay.' He took an exercise book out of his white plastic suit as Abel sat down stiffly. Despite his dry smile and warm eyes there was something about Dr Francis that always put Abel on his guard.

Perhaps Dr Francis knew too?

'The Closed Community,' Dr Francis read out. 'A strange subject for an essay, Abel.'

Abel shrugged. 'It was a free choice. Aren't we really expected to choose something unusual?'

Dr Francis grinned. 'A good answer. But seriously, Abel, why pick a subject like that?'

Abel fingered the seals on his suit. These served no useful purpose, but by blowing through them it was possible to inflate the suit. 'Well, it's a sort of study of life at the Station, how we all get on with each other. What else is there to write about? I don't see that it's so strange.'

'Perhaps not. No reason why you shouldn't write about the Station. All four of the others did too. But you called yours "The Closed Community". The Station isn't closed, Abel, is it?'

'It's closed in the sense that we can't go outside,' Abel explained slowly. 'That's all I meant.'

'Outside,' Dr Francis repeated. 'It's an interesting concept. You must have given the whole subject a lot of thought. When did you first start thinking along these lines?'

'After the dream,' Abel said. Dr Francis had deliberately sidestepped his use of the word 'outside' and he searched for some means of getting to the point. In his pocket he felt the small plumbline he carried around. 'Dr Francis, perhaps you can explain something to me. Why is the Station revolving?'

'Is it?' Dr Francis looked up with interest. 'How do you know?'

Abel reached up and fastened the plumbline to the ceiling stanchion.

'The interval between the ball and the wall is about an eighth of an inch greater at the bottom than at the top. Centrifugal forces are driving it outwards. I calculated that the Station is revolving at about two feet per second.'

Dr Francis nodded thoughtfully. 'That's just about right,' he said matter-of-factly. He stood up. 'Let's take a trip to my office. It looks as if it's time you and I had a serious talk.'

The Station was on four levels. The lower two contained the crew's quarters, two circular decks of cabins which housed the 14 people on board the Station. The senior clan was the Peters, led by Captain Theodore, a big stern man of taciturn disposition who rarely strayed from Control. Abel had never been allowed there, but the Captain's son, Matthew, often described the hushed dome-like cabin filled with luminous dials and flickering lights, the strange humming music.

All the male members of the Peters clan worked in Control – grandfather Peters, a white-haired old man with humorous eyes, had been Captain before Abel was born – and with the Captain's wife and Zenna they constituted the elite of the Station.

However, the Grangers, the clan to which Abel belonged, was in many respects more important, as he had begun to realize. The day-to-day running of the Station, the detailed programming of emergency drills, duty rosters and commissary menus, was the responsibility of Abel's father, Matthias, and without his firm but flexible hand the Bakers, who cleaned the cabins and ran the commissary, would never have known what to do. And it was only the deliberate intermingling in Recreation which his father devised that brought the Peters and Bakers together, or each family would have stayed indefinitely in its own cabins.

Lastly, there was Dr Francis. He didn't belong to any of the three clans. Sometimes Abel asked himself where Dr Francis had come from, but his mind always fogged at a question like that, as the conditioning blocks fell like bulkheads across his thought trains (logic was a dangerous tool at the Station). Dr Francis' energy and vitality, his relaxed good humour – in a way, he was the only person in the Station who ever made any jokes – were out of character with everyone else. Much as he sometimes disliked Dr Francis for snooping around and being a know-all, Abel realized how dreary life in the Station would seem without him.

Dr Francis closed the door of his cabin and gestured Abel into a seat. All the furniture in the Station was bolted to the floor, but Abel noticed that Dr Francis had unscrewed his chair so that he could tilt it backwards. The huge vacuum-proof cylinder of the doctor's sleeping tank jutted from the wall, its massive metal body able to withstand any accident the Station might suffer. Abel hated the thought of sleeping in the cylinder – luckily the entire crew quarters were accident-secure – and wondered why Dr Francis chose to live alone up on A-Deck.

'Tell me, Abel,' Dr Francis began, 'has it ever occurred to you to ask why the Station is here?'

Abel shrugged. 'Well, it's designed to keep us alive, it's our home.'

'Yes, that's true, but obviously it has some other object than just our own survival. Who do you think built the Station in the first place?'

'Our fathers, I suppose, or grandfathers. Or *their* grandfathers.'

'Fair enough. And where were they before they built it?'

Abel struggled with the *reductio ad absurdum*. 'I don't know, they must have been floating around in mid-air!'

Dr Francis joined in the laughter. 'Wonderful thought. Actually it's not that far from the truth. But we can't accept that as it stands.'

The doctor's self-contained office gave Abel an idea. 'Perhaps they came from another Station? An even bigger one?'

Dr Francis nodded encouragingly. 'Brilliant, Abel. A first-class piece of deduction. All right, then, let's assume that. Somewhere away from us, a huge Station exists, perhaps a hundred times bigger than this one, maybe even a thousand. Why not?'

'It's possible,' Abel admitted, accepting the idea with surprising ease.

'Right. Now you remember your course in advanced mechanics – the imaginary planetary system, with the orbiting bodies held together by mutual gravitational attraction? Let's assume further that such a system actually exists. Okay?'

'Here?' Abel said quickly. 'In your cabin?' Then he added 'In your sleeping cylinder?'

Dr Francis sat back. 'Abel, you do come up with some amazing things. An interesting association of ideas. No, it would be too big for that. Try to imagine a planetary system orbiting around a central body of absolutely enormous size, each of the planets a million times larger than the Station.' When Abel nodded, he went on. 'And suppose that the big Station, the one a thousand times larger than this, were attached to one of the planets, and that the people in it decided to go to another planet. So they build a smaller Station, about the size of this one, and send it off through the air. Make sense?'

'In a way.' Strangely, the completely abstract concepts were less remote than he would have expected. Deep in his mind dim memories stirred, interlocking with what he had already guessed about the Station. He gazed steadily at Dr Francis. 'You're saying that's what the Station is doing? That the planetary system exists?'

Dr Francis nodded. 'You'd more or less guessed before I told you. Unconsciously, you've known all about it for several years. A few minutes from now I'm going to remove some of the conditioning blocks, and when you wake up in a couple of hours you'll understand everything. You'll know then that in fact the Station is a space ship, flying from our home planet, Earth, where our grandfathers were born, to another planet millions of miles away, in a distant orbiting system. Our grandfathers

always lived on Earth, and we are the first people ever to undertake such a journey. You can be proud that you're here. Your grandfather, who volunteered to come, was a great man, and we've got to do everything to make sure that the Station keeps running.'

Abel nodded quickly. 'When do we get there – the planet we're flying to?'

Dr Francis looked down at his hands, his face growing sombre. 'We'll never get there, Abel. The journey takes too long. This is a multi-generation space vehicle, only our children will land and they'll be old by the time they do. But don't worry, you'll go on thinking of the Station as your only home, and that's deliberate, so that you and your children will be happy here.'

He went over to the TV monitor screen by which he kept in touch with Captain Peters, his fingers playing across the control tabs. Suddenly the screen lit up, a blaze of fierce points of light flared into the cabin, throwing a brilliant phosphorescent glitter across the walls, dappling Abel's hands and suit. He gaped at the huge balls of fire, apparently frozen in the middle of a giant explosion, hanging in vast patterns.

'This is the celestial sphere,' Dr Francis explained. 'The starfield into which the Station is moving.' He touched a bright speck of light in the lower half of the screen. 'Alpha Centauri, the star around which revolves the planet the Station will one day land upon.' He turned to Abel. 'You remember all these terms I'm using, don't you, Abel? None of them seems strange.'

Abel nodded, the wells of his unconscious memory flooding into his mind as Dr Francis spoke. The TV screen blanked and then revealed a new picture. They appeared to be looking down at an enormous top-like structure, the flanks of a metal pylon sloping towards its centre. In the background the starfield rotated slowly in a clockwise direction. 'This is the Station,' Dr Francis explained, 'seen from a camera mounted in the nose boom. All visual checks have to be made indirectly, as the stellar radiation would blind us. Just below the ship you can see a single star, the Sun, from which we set out 50 years ago. It's now almost too distant to be visible, but a deep inherited memory of it is the burning disc you see in your dreams. We've done what we can to erase it, but unconsciously all of us see it too.'

He switched off the set and the brilliant pattern of light swayed and fell back. 'The social engineering built into the ship is far more intricate than the mechanical, Abel. It's three generations since the Station set off, and birth, marriage and birth again have followed exactly as they were designed to. As your father's heir great demands are going to be made on your patience and understanding. Any disunity here would bring disaster. The conditioning programmes are not equipped to give you more than a general outline of the course to follow. Most of it will be left to you.'

'Will you always be here?'

Dr Francis stood up. 'No, Abel, I won't. No one here lives forever. Your

father will die, and Captain Peters and myself.' He moved to the door. 'We'll go now to Conditioning. In three hours' time, when you wake up, you'll find yourself a new man.'

Letting himself back into his cabin, Francis leaned wearily against the bulkhead, feeling the heavy rivets with his fingers, here and there flaking away as the metal slowly rusted. When he switched on the TV set he looked tired and dispirited, and gazed absently at the last scene he had shown Abel, the boom camera's view of the ship. He was just about to select another frame when he noticed a dark shadow swing across the surface of the hull.

He leaned forward to examine it, frowning in annoyance as the shadow moved away and faded among the stars. He pressed another tab, and the screen divided into a large chessboard, five frames wide by five deep. The top line showed Control, the main pilot and navigation deck lit by the dim glow of the instrument panels, Captain Peters sitting impassively before the compass screen.

Next, he watched Matthias Granger begin his afternoon inspection of the ship. Most of the passengers seemed reasonably happy, but their faces lacked any lustre. All spent at least 2–3 hours each day bathing in the UV light flooding through the recreation lounge, but the pallor continued, perhaps an unconscious realization that they had been born and were living in what would also be their own tomb. Without the continuous conditioning sessions, and the hypnotic reassurance of the sub-sonic voices, they would long ago have become will-less automatons.

Switching off the set, he prepared to climb into the sleeping cylinder. The airlock was three feet in diameter, waist-high off the floor. The time seal rested at zero, and he moved it forward 12 hours, then set it so that the seal could only be broken from within. He swung the lock out and crawled in over the moulded foam mattress, snapping the door shut behind him.

Lying back in the thin yellow light, he slipped his fingers through the ventilator grille in the rear wall, pressed the unit into its socket and turned it sharply. Somewhere an electric motor throbbed briefly, the end wall of the cylinder swung back slowly like a vault door and bright daylight poured in.

Quickly, Francis climbed out onto a small metal platform that jutted from the upper slope of a huge white asbestos-covered dome. Fifty feet above was the roof of a large hangar. A maze of pipes and cables traversed the surface of the dome, interlacing like the vessels of a giant bloodshot eye, and a narrow stairway led down to the floor below. The entire dome, some 150 feet wide, was revolving slowly. A line of five trucks was drawn up by the stores depot on the far side of the hangar, and a man in a brown uniform waved to him from one of the glass-walled offices.

At the bottom of the ladder he jumped down on to the hangar floor, ignoring the curious stares from the soldiers unloading the stores. Halfway across he craned up at the revolving bulk of the dome. A black perforated sail, 50 feet square, like a fragment of a planetarium, was suspended from the roof over the apex of the dome, a TV camera directly below it, a large metal sphere mounted about five feet from the lens. One of the guy-ropes had snapped and the sail tilted slightly to reveal the catwalk along the centre of the roof.

He pointed this out to a maintenance sergeant warming his hands in one of the ventilator outlets from the dome. 'You'll have to string that back. Some fool was wandering along the catwalk and throwing his shadow straight on to the model. I could see it clearly on the TV screen. Luckily no one spotted it.'

'Okay, Doctor, I'll get it fixed.' He chuckled sourly. 'That would have been a laugh, though. Really give them something to worry about.'

The man's tone annoyed Francis. 'They've got plenty to worry about as it is.'

'I don't know about that, Doctor. Some people here think they have it all ways. Quiet and warm in there, nothing to do except sit back and listen to those hypno-drills.' He looked out bleakly at the abandoned airfield stretching away to the cold tundra beyond the perimeter, and turned up his collar. 'We're the boys back here on Mother Earth who do the work, out in this Godforsaken dump. If you need any more spacecadets, Doctor, remember me.'

Francis managed a smile and stepped into the control office, made his way through the clerks sitting at trestle tables in front of the progress charts. Each carried the name of one of the dome passengers and a tabulated breakdown of progress through the psychometric tests and conditioning programmes. Other charts listed the day's rosters, copies of those posted that morning by Matthias Granger.

Inside Colonel Chalmers' office Francis relaxed back gratefully in the warmth, describing the salient features of his day's observation. 'I wish you could go in there and move around them, Paul,' he concluded. 'It's not the same spying through the TV cameras. You've got to talk to them, measure yourself against people like Granger and Peters.'

'You're right, they're fine men, like all the others. It's a pity they're wasted there.'

'They're not wasted,' Francis insisted. 'Every piece of data will be immensely valuable when the first space ships set out.' He ignored Chalmers' muttered 'If they do' and went on: 'Zenna and Abel worry me a little. It may be necessary to bring forward the date of their marriage. I know it will raise eyebrows, but the girl is as fully mature at 15 as she will be four years from now, and she'll be a settling influence on Abel, stop him from thinking too much.'

Chalmers shook his head doubtfully. 'Sounds a good idea, but a girl

of 15 and a boy of 16 –? You'd raise a storm, Roger. Technically they're wards of court, every decency league would be up in arms.'

Francis gestured irritably. 'Need they know? We've really got a problem with Abel, the boy's too clever. He'd more or less worked out for himself that the Station was a space ship, he merely lacked the vocabulary to describe it. Now that we're starting to lift the conditioning blocks he'll want to know everything. It will be a big job to prevent him from smelling a rat, particularly with the slack way this place is being run. Did you see the shadow on the TV screen? We're damn lucky Peters didn't have a heart attack.'

Chalmers nodded. 'I'm getting that tightened up. A few mistakes are bound to happen, Roger. It's damn cold for the control crew working around the dome. Try to remember that the people outside are just as important as those inside.'

'Of course. The real trouble is that the budget is ludicrously out of date. It's only been revised once in 50 years. Perhaps General Short can generate some official interest, get a new deal for us. He sounds like a pretty brisk new broom.' Chalmers pursed his lips doubtfully, but Francis continued 'I don't know whether the tapes are wearing out, but the negative conditioning doesn't hold as well as it used to. We'll probably have to tighten up the programmes. I've made a start by pushing Abel's graduation forward.'

'Yes, I watched you on the screen here. The control boys became quite worked up next door. One or two of them are as keen as you, Roger, they'd been programming ahead for three months. It meant a lot of time wasted for them. I think you ought to check with me before you make a decision like that. The dome isn't your private laboratory.'

Francis accepted the reproof. Lamely, he said 'It was one of those spot decisions, I'm sorry. There was nothing else to do.'

Chalmers gently pressed home his point. 'I'm not so sure. I thought you rather overdid the long-term aspects of the journey. Why go out of your way to tell him he would never reach planet-fall? It only heightens his sense of isolation, makes it that much more difficult if we decide to shorten the journey.'

Francis looked up. 'There's no chance of that, is there?'

Chalmers paused thoughtfully. 'Roger, I really advise you not to get too involved with the project. Keep saying to yourself they're-not-going-to-Alpha-Centauri. They're here on Earth, and if the government decided it they'd be let out tomorrow. I know the courts would have to sanction it but that's a formality. It's 50 years since this project was started and a good number of influential people feel that it's gone on for too long. Ever since the Mars and Moon colonies failed, space programmes have been cut right back. They think the money here is being poured away for the amusement of a few sadistic psychologists.'

'You know that isn't true,' Francis retorted. 'I may have been over-hasty,

but on the whole this project has been scrupulously conducted. Without exaggeration, if you did send a dozen people on a multi-generation ship to Alpha Centauri you couldn't do better than duplicate everything that's taken place here, down to the last cough and sneeze. If the information we've obtained had been available the Mars and Moon colonies never would have failed!'

'True. But irrelevant. Don't you understand, when everyone was eager to get into space they were prepared to accept the idea of a small group being sealed into a tank for 100 years, particularly when the original team volunteered. Now, when interest has evaporated, people are beginning to feel that there's something obscene about this human zoo; what began as a grand adventure of the spirit of Columbus, has become a grisly joke. In one sense we've learned too much – the social stratification of the three families is the sort of unwelcome datum that doesn't do the project much good. Another is the complete ease with which we've manipulated them, made them believe anything we've wanted.' Chalmers leaned forward across the desk. 'Confidentially, Roger, General Short has been put in command for one reason only – to close this place down. It may take years, but it's going to be done, I warn you. The important job now is to get those people out of there, not keep them in.'

Francis stared bleakly at Chalmers. 'Do you really believe that?'

'Frankly, Roger, yes. This project should never have been launched. You can't manipulate people the way we're doing – the endless hypno-drills, the forced pairing of children – look at yourself, five minutes ago you were seriously thinking of marrying two teenage children just to stop them using their minds. The whole thing degrades human dignity, all the taboos, the increasing degree of introspection – sometimes Peters and Granger don't speak to anyone for two or three weeks – the way life in the dome has become tenable only by accepting the insane situation as the normal one. I think the reaction against the project is healthy.'

Francis stared out at the dome. A gang of men were loading the so-called 'compressed food' (actually frozen foods with the brand names removed) into the commissary hatchway. Next morning, when Baker and his wife dialled the pre-arranged menu, the supplies would be promptly delivered, apparently from the space-hold. To some people, Francis knew, the project might well seem a complete fraud.

Quietly he said: 'The people who volunteered accepted the sacrifice, and all it involved. How's Short going to get them out? Just open the door and whistle?'

Chalmers smiled, a little wearily. 'He's not a fool, Roger. He's as sincerely concerned about their welfare as you are. Half the crew, particularly the older ones, would go mad within five minutes. But don't be disappointed, the project has more than proved its worth.'

'It won't do that until they "land". If the project ends it will be we who have failed, not them. We can't rationalize by saying it's cruel

or unpleasant. We owe it to the 14 people in the dome to keep it going.'

Chalmers watched him shrewdly. '14? You mean 13, don't you, Doctor? Or are you inside the dome too?'

This ship had stopped rotating. Sitting at his desk in Command, planning the next day's fire drill, Abel noticed the sudden absence of movement. All morning, as he walked around the ship – he no longer used the term Station – he had been aware of an inward drag that pulled him towards the wall, as if one leg were shorter than the other.

When he mentioned this to his father the older man merely said: 'Captain Peters is in charge of Control. Always let him worry where the navigation of the ship is concerned.'

This sort of advice now meant nothing to Abel. In the previous two months his mind had attacked everything around him voraciously, probing and analysing, examining every facet of life in the Station. An enormous, once-suppressed vocabulary of abstract terms and relationships lay latent below the surface of his mind, and nothing would stop him applying it.

Over their meal trays in the commissary he grilled Matthew Peters about the ship's flight path, the great parabola which would carry it to Alpha Centauri.

'What about the currents built into the ship?' he asked. 'The rotation was designed to eliminate the magnetic poles set up when the ship was originally constructed. How are you compensating for that?'

Matthew looked puzzled. 'I'm not sure, exactly. Probably the instruments are automatically compensated.' When Abel smiled sceptically he shrugged. 'Anyway, Father knows all about it. There's no doubt we're right on course.'

'We hope,' Abel murmured *sotto voce*. The more Abel asked Matthew about the navigational devices he and his father operated in Control the more obvious it became that they were merely carrying out low-level instrument checks, and that their role was limited to replacing burnt-out pilot lights. Most of the instruments operated automatically, and they might as well have been staring at cabinets full of mattress flock.

What a joke if they were!

Smiling to himself, Abel realized that he had probably stated no more than the truth. It would be unlikely for the navigation to be entrusted to the crew when the slightest human error could throw the space ship irretrievably out of control, send it hurtling into a passing star. The designers of the ship would have sealed the automatic pilots well out of reach, given the crew light supervisory duties that created an illusion of control.

That was the real clue to life aboard the ship. None of their roles could be taken at face value. The day-to-day, minute-to-minute programming

carried out by himself and his father was merely a set of variations on a pattern already laid down; the permutations possible were endless, but the fact that he could send Matthew Peters to the commissary at 12 o'clock rather than 12.30 didn't give him any real power over Matthew's life. The master programmes printed by the computers selected the day's menus, safety drills and recreation periods, and a list of names to choose from, but the slight leeway allowed, the extra two or three names supplied, were here in case of illness, not to give Abel any true freedom of choice.

One day, Abel promised himself, he would programme himself out of the conditioning sessions. Shrewdly he guessed that the conditioning still blocked out a great deal of interesting material, that half his mind remained submerged. Something about the ship suggested that there might be more to it than –

'Hello, Abel, you look far away.' Dr Francis sat down next to him. 'What's worrying you?'

'I was just calculating something,' Abel explained quickly. 'Tell me, assuming that each member of the crew consumes about three pounds of non-circulated food each day, roughly half a ton per year, the total cargo must be about 800 tons, and that's not allowing for any supplies after planet-fall. There should be at least 1,500 tons aboard. Quite a weight.'

'Not in absolute terms, Abel. The Station is only a small fraction of the ship. The main reactors, fuel tanks and space holds together weigh over 30,000 tons. They provide the gravitational pull that holds you to the floor.'

Abel shook his head slowly. 'Hardly, Doctor. The attraction must come from the stellar gravitational fields, or the weight of the ship would have to be about 6×10^{20} tons.'

Dr Francis watched Abel reflectively, aware that the young man had led him into a simple trap. The figure he had quoted was near enough the Earth's mass. 'These are complex problems, Abel. I wouldn't worry too much about stellar mechanics. Captain Peters has that responsibility.'

'I'm not trying to usurp it,' Abel assured him. 'Merely to extend my own knowledge. Don't you think it might be worth departing from the rules a little? For example, it would be interesting to test the effects of continued isolation. We could select a small group, subject them to artificial stimuli, even seal them off from the rest of the crew and condition them to believe they were back on Earth. It could be a really valuable experiment, Doctor.'

As he waited in the conference room for General Short to finish his opening harangue, Francis repeated the last sentence to himself, wondering idly what Abel, with his limitless enthusiasm, would have made of the circle of defeated faces around the table.

'. . . regret as much as you do, gentlemen, the need to discontinue the project. However, now that a decision has been made by the Space Department, it is our duty to implement it. Of course, the task won't be

an easy one. What we need is a phased withdrawal, a gradual readjustment of the world around the crew that will bring them down to Earth as gently as a parachute.' The General was a brisk, sharp-faced man in his fifties, with burly shoulders but sensitive eyes. He turned to Dr Kersh, who was responsible for the dietary and biometric controls aboard the dome. 'From what you tell me, Doctor, we might not have as much time as we'd like. This boy Abel sounds something of a problem.'

Kersh smiled. 'I was looking in at the commissary, overheard him tell Dr Francis that he wanted to run an experiment on a small group of the crew. An isolation drill, would you believe it. He's estimated that the tractor crews may be isolated for up to two years when the first foraging trips are made.'

Captain Sanger, the engineering officer, added: 'He's also trying to duck his conditioning sessions. He's wearing a couple of foam pads under his earphones, missing about 90 per cent of the subsonics. We spotted it when the EEG tape we record showed no alpha waves. At first we thought it was a break in the cable, but when we checked visually on the screen we saw that he had his eyes open. He wasn't listening.'

Francis drummed on the table. 'It wouldn't have mattered. The sub-sonic was a maths instruction sequence – the four-figure antilog system.'

'A good thing he did miss them,' Kersh said with a laugh. 'Sooner or later he'll work out that the dome is travelling in an elliptical orbit 93 million miles from a dwarf star of the G_0 spectral class.'

'What are you doing about this attempt to evade conditioning, Dr Francis?' Short asked. When Francis shrugged vaguely he added: 'I think we ought to regard the matter fairly seriously. From now on we'll be relying on the programming.'

Flatly, Francis said: 'Abel will resume the conditioning. There's no need to do anything. Without the regular daily contact he'll soon feel lost. The sub-sonic voice is composed of his mother's vocal tones; when he no longer hears it he'll lose his orientations, feel completely deserted.'

Short nodded slowly. 'Well, let's hope so.' He addressed Dr Kersh. 'At a rough estimate, Doctor, how long will it take to bring them back? Bearing in mind they'll have to be given complete freedom and that every TV and newspaper network in the world will interview each one a hundred times.'

Kersh chose his words carefully. 'Obviously a matter of years, General. All the conditioning drills will have to be gradually rescored; as a stop-gap measure we may need to introduce a meteor collision . . . guessing, I'd say three to five years. Possibly longer.'

'Fair enough. What would you estimate, Dr Francis?'

Francis fiddled with his blotter, trying to view the question seriously. 'I've no idea. *Bring them back.* What do you really mean, General? Bring what back?' Irritated, he snapped: 'A hundred years.'

Laughter crossed the table, and Short smiled at him, not unamiably.

'That's fifty years more than the original project, Doctor. You can't have been doing a very good job here.'

Francis shook his head. 'You're wrong, General. The original project was to get them to Alpha Centauri. Nothing was said about bringing them *back*.' When the laughter fell away Francis cursed himself for his foolishness; antagonizing the General wouldn't help the people in the dome.

But Short seemed unruffled. 'All right, then, it's obviously going to take some time.' Pointedly, with a glance at Francis he added: 'It's the men and women in the ship we're thinking of, not ourselves; if we need a hundred years we'll take them, not one less. You may be interested to hear that the Space Department chiefs feel about fifteen years will be necessary. At least.' There was a quickening of interest around the table. Francis watched Short with surprise. In fifteen years a lot could happen, there might be another spaceward swing of public opinion.

'The Department recommends that the project continue as before, with whatever budgetary parings we can make – stopping the dome is just a start – and that we condition the crew to believe that a round trip is in progress, that their mission is merely one of reconnaissance, and that they are bringing vital information back to Earth. When they step out of the spaceship they'll be treated as heroes and accept the strangeness of the world around them.' Short looked across the table, waiting for someone to reply. Kersh stared doubtfully at his hands, and Sanger and Chalmers played mechanically with their blotters.

Just before Short continued Francis pulled himself together, realizing that he was faced with his last opportunity to save the project. However much they disagreed with Short, none of the others would try to argue with him.

'I'm afraid that won't do, General,' he said, 'though I appreciate the Department's foresight and your own sympathetic approach. The scheme you've outlined sounds plausible, but it just won't work.' He sat forward, his voice controlled and precise. 'General, ever since they were children these people have been trained to accept that they were a closed group, and would never have contact with anyone else. On the unconscious level, on the level of their functional nervous systems, no one else in the world exists, for them the neuronic basis of reality is isolation. You'll never train them to invert their whole universe, any more than you can train a fish to fly. If you start to tamper with the fundamental patterns of their psyches you'll produce the sort of complete mental block you see when you try to teach a left-handed person to use his right.'

Francis glanced at Dr Kersh, who was nodding in agreement. 'Believe me, General, contrary to what you and the Space Department naturally assume, the people in the dome do *not* want to come out. Given the choice they would prefer to stay there, just as the goldfish prefers to stay in its bowl.'

Short paused before replying, evidently re-assessing Francis. 'You may be right, Doctor,' he admitted. 'But where does that get us? We've got 15 years, perhaps 25 at the outside.'

'There's only one way to do it,' Francis told him. 'Let the project continue, exactly as before, but with one difference. Prevent them from marrying and having children. In 25 years only the present younger generation will still be alive, and a further five years from then they'll all be dead. A life span in the dome is little more than 45 years. At the age of 30 Abel will probably be an old man. When they start to die off no one will care about them any longer.'

There was a full half minute's silence, and then Kersh said: 'It's the best suggestion, General. Humane, and yet faithful both to the original project and the Department's instructions. The absence of children would be only a slight deviation from the conditioned pathway. The basic isolation of the group would be strengthened, rather than diminished, also their realization that they themselves will never see planet-fall. If we drop the pedagogical drills and play down the space flight they will soon become a small close community, little different from any other out-group on the road to extinction.'

Chalmers cut in: 'Another point, General. It would be far easier – and cheaper – to stage, and as the members died off we could progressively close down the ship until finally there might be only a single deck left, perhaps even a few cabins.'

Short stood up and paced over to the window, looking out through the clear glass over the frosted panes at the great dome in the hangar.

'It sounds a dreadful prospect,' he commented. 'Completely insane. As you say, though, it may be the only way out.'

Moving quietly among the trucks parked in the darkened hangar, Francis paused for a moment to look back at the lighted windows of the control deck. Two or three of the night staff sat watch over the line of TV screens, half asleep themselves as they observed the sleeping occupants of the dome.

He ducked out of the shadows and ran across to the dome, climbed the stairway to the entrance point thirty feet above. Opening the external lock, he crawled in and closed it behind him, then unfastened the internal entry hatch and pulled himself out of the sleeping cylinder into the silent cabin.

A single dim light glowed over the TV monitor screen as it revealed the three orderlies in the control deck, lounging back in a haze of cigarette smoke six feet from the camera.

Francis turned up the speaker volume, then tapped the mouthpiece sharply with his knuckle.

Tunic unbuttoned, sleep still shadowing his eyes, Colonel Chalmers leaned forward intently into the screen, the orderlies at his shoulder.

'Believe me, Roger, you're proving nothing. General Short and the

Space Department won't withdraw their decision now that a special bill of enactment has been passed.' When Francis still looked sceptical he added: 'If anything, you're more likely to jeopardize them.'

'I'll take a chance,' Francis said. 'Too many guarantees have been broken in the past. Here I'll be able to keep an eye on things.' He tried to sound cool and unemotional; the cine-cameras would be recording the scene and it was important to establish the right impression. General Short would be only too keen to avoid a scandal. If he decided Francis was unlikely to sabotage the project he would probably leave him in the dome.

Chalmers pulled up a chair, his face earnest, 'Roger, give yourself time to reconsider everything. You may be more of a discordant element than you realize. Remember, nothing would be easier than getting you out – a child could cut his way through the rusty hull with a blunt can-opener.'

'Don't try it,' Francis warned him quietly. 'I'll be moving down to C-Deck, so if you come in after me they'll all know. Believe me, I won't try to interfere with the withdrawal programmes. And I won't arrange any teen-age marriages. But I think the people inside may need me now for more than eight hours a day.'

'Francis!' Chalmers shouted. 'Once you go down there you'll never come out! Don't you realize you're entombing yourself in a situation that's totally unreal? You're deliberately withdrawing into a nightmare, sending yourself off on a non-stop journey to *nowhere*!'

Curtly, before he switched the set off for the last time, Francis replied: 'Not nowhere, Colonel: Alpha Centauri.'

Sitting down thankfully in the narrow bunk in his cabin, Francis rested briefly before setting off for the commissary. All day he had been busy coding the computer punch tapes for Abel, and his eyes ached with the strain of manually stamping each of the thousands of minuscule holes. For eight hours he had sat without a break in the small isolation cell, electrodes clamped to his chest, knees and elbows while Abel measured his cardiac and respiratory rhythms.

The tests bore no relation to the daily programmes Abel now worked out for his father, and Francis was finding it difficult to maintain his patience. Initially Abel had tested his ability to follow a prescribed set of instructions, producing an endless exponential function, then a digital representation of *pi* to a thousand places. Finally Abel had persuaded Francis to cooperate in a more difficult test – the task of producing a totally random sequence. Whenever he unconsciously repeated a simple progression, as he did if he was tired or bored, or a fragment of a larger possible progression, the computer scanning his progress sounded an alarm on the desk and he would have to start afresh. After a few hours the buzzer rasped out every ten seconds, snapping at him like a bad-tempered insect. Francis had finally hobbled over to the door that afternoon, entangling himself in the electrode leads, found to his annoyance that the door was locked (ostensibly to prevent any interruption by a fire patrol), then saw through

the small porthole that the computer in the cubicle outside was running unattended.

But when Francis' pounding roused Abel from the far end of the next laboratory he had been almost irritable with the doctor for wanting to discontinue the experiment.

'Damn it, Abel, I've been punching away at these things for three weeks now.' He winced as Abel disconnected him, brusquely tearing off the adhesive tape. 'Trying to produce random sequences isn't all that easy – my sense of reality is beginning to fog.' (Sometimes he wondered if Abel was secretly waiting for this.) 'I think I'm entitled to a vote of thanks.'

'But we arranged for the trial to last three days, Doctor,' Abel pointed out. 'It's only later that the valuable results begin to appear. It's the errors you make that are interesting. The whole experiment is pointless now.'

'Well, it's probably pointless anyway. Some mathematicians used to maintain that a random sequence was impossible to define.'

'But we can assume that it *is* possible,' Abel insisted. 'I was just giving you some practice before we started on the trans-finite numbers.'

Francis baulked here. 'I'm sorry, Abel. Maybe I'm not so fit as I used to be. Anyway, I've got other duties to attend to.'

'But they don't take long, Doctor. There's really nothing for you to do now.'

He was right, as Francis was forced to admit. In the year he had spent in the dome Abel had remarkably streamlined the daily routines, provided himself and Francis with an excess of leisure time, particularly as the latter never went to conditioning (Francis was frightened of the sub-sonic voices – Chalmers and Short would be subtle in their attempts to extricate him, perhaps too subtle).

Life aboard the dome had been more of a drain on him than he anticipated. Chained to the routines of the ship, limited in his recreations and with few intellectual pastimes – there were no books aboard the ship – he found it increasingly difficult to sustain his former good humour, was beginning to sink into the deadening lethargy that had overcome most of the other crew members. Matthias Granger had retreated to his cabin, content to leave the programming to Abel, spent his time playing with a damaged clock, while the two Peters rarely strayed from Control. The three wives were almost completely inert, satisfied to knit and murmur to each other. The days passed indistinguishably. Sometimes Francis told himself wryly he nearly *did* believe that they were en route for Alpha Centauri. That would have been a joke for General Short!

At 6.30 when he went to the commissary for his evening meal, he found that he was a quarter of an hour late.

'Your meal time was changed this afternoon,' Baker told him, lowering the hatchway. 'I got nothing ready for you.'

Francis began to remonstrate but the man was adamant. 'I can't make a

special dip into space-hold just because you didn't look at Routine Orders can I, Doctor?'

On the way out Francis met Abel, tried to persuade him to countermand the order. 'You could have warned me, Abel. Damnation, I've been sitting inside your test rig all afternoon.'

'But you went back to your cabin, Doctor,' Abel pointed out smoothly. 'You pass three SRO bulletins on your way from the laboratory. Always look at them at every opportunity, remember. Last-minute changes are liable at any time. I'm afraid you'll have to wait until 10.30 now.'

Francis went back to his cabin, suspecting that the sudden change had been Abel's revenge on him for discontinuing the test. He would have to be more conciliatory with Abel, or the young man could make his life a hell, literally starve him to death. Escape from the dome was impossible now – there was a mandatory 20 year sentence on anyone making an unauthorized entry into the space simulator.

After resting for an hour or so, he left his cabin at 8 o'clock to carry out his duty checks of the pressure seals by the B-Deck Meteor Screen. He always went through the pretence of reading them, enjoying the sense of participation in the space flight which the exercise gave him, deliberately accepting the illusion.

The seals were mounted in the control point set at ten yard intervals along the perimeter corridor, a narrow circular passageway around the main corridor. Alone there, the servos clicking and snapping, he felt at peace within the space vehicle. 'Earth itself is in orbit around the Sun,' he mused as he checked the seals, 'and the whole solar system is travelling at 40 miles a second towards the constellation Lyra. The degree of illusion that exists is a complex question.'

Something cut through his reverie.

The pressure indicator was flickering slightly. The needle wavered between 0.001 and 0.0015 psi. The pressure inside the dome was fractionally above atmospheric, in order that dust might be expelled through untoward cracks (though the main object of the pressure seals was to get the crew safely into the vacuum-proof emergency cylinders in case the dome was damaged and required internal repairs).

For a moment Francis panicked, wondering whether Short had decided to come in after him – the reading, although meaningless, indicated that a breach had opened in the hull. Then the hand moved back to zero, and footsteps sounded along the radial corridor at right angles past the next bulkhead.

Quickly Francis stepped into its shadow. Before his death old Peters had spent a lot of time mysteriously pottering around the corridor, probably secreting a private food cache behind one of the rusting panels.

He leaned forward as the footsteps crossed the corridor.

Abel?

. . .

He watched the young man disappear down a stairway, then made his way into the radial corridor, searching the steel-grey sheeting for a retractable panel. Immediately adjacent to the end wall of the corridor, against the outer skin of the dome, was a small fire control booth.

A tuft of slate-white hairs lay on the floor of the booth.

Asbestos fibres!

Francis stepped into the booth, within a few seconds located a loosened panel that had rusted off its rivets. About ten inches by six, it slid back easily. Beyond it was the outer wall of the dome, a hand's breadth away. Here too was a loose plate, held in position by a crudely fashioned hook.

Francis hesitated, then lifted the hook and drew back the panel.

He was looking straight down into the hangar!

Below, a line of trucks was disgorging supplies on to the concrete floor under a couple of spotlights, a sergeant shouting orders at the labour squad. To the right was the control deck, Chalmers in his office on the evening shift.

The spy-hole was directly below the stairway, and the overhanging metal steps shielded it from the men in the hangar. The asbestos had been carefully frayed so that it concealed the retractable plate. The wire hook was as badly rusted as the rest of the hull, and Francis estimated that the window had been in use for over 30 or 40 years.

So almost certainly old Peters had regularly looked out through the window, and knew perfectly well that the space ship was a myth. None the less he had stayed aboard, perhaps realizing that the truth would destroy the others, or preferring to be captain of an artificial ship rather than a self-exposed curiosity in the world outside.

Presumably he had passed on the secret. Not to his bleak taciturn son, but to the one other lively mind, one who would keep the secret and make the most of it. For his own reasons he too had decided to stay in the dome, realizing that he would soon be the effective captain, free to pursue his experiments in applied psychology. He might even have failed to grasp that Francis was not a true member of the crew. His confident mastery of the programming, his lapse of interest in Control, his casualness over the safety devices, all meant one thing –

Abel knew!

1962

PASSPORT TO ETERNITY

It was half past love on New Day in Zenith and the clocks were striking heaven. All over the city the sounds of revelry echoed upwards into the dazzling Martian night, but high on Sunset Ridge, among the mansions of the rich, Margot and Clifford Gorrell faced each other in glum silence.

Frowning, Margot flipped impatiently through the vacation brochure on her lap, then tossed it away with an elaborate gesture of despair.

'But Clifford, why do we have to go to the same place every summer? I'd like to do something interesting for a change. This year the Lovatts are going to the Venus Fashion Festival, and Bobo and Peter Anders have just booked into the fire beaches at Saturn. They'll all have a wonderful time, while we're quietly taking the last boat to nowhere.'

Clifford Gorrell nodded impassively, one hand cupped over the sound control in the arm of his chair. They had been arguing all evening, and Margot's voice threw vivid sparks of irritation across the walls and ceiling. Grey and mottled, they would take days to drain.

'I'm sorry you feel like that, Margot. Where would you like to go?'

Margot shrugged scornfully, staring out at the corona of a million neon signs that illuminated the city below. 'Does it matter?'

'Of course. You arrange the vacation this time.'

Margot hesitated, one eye keenly on her husband. Then she sat forward happily, turning up her fluorescent violet dress until she glowed like an Algolian rayfish.

'Clifford, I've got a wonderful idea! Yesterday I was down in the Colonial Bazaar, thinking about our holiday, when I found a small dream bureau that's just been opened. Something like the Dream Dromes in Neptune City everyone was crazy about two or three years ago, but instead of having to plug into whatever programme happens to be going you have your own dream plays specially designed for you.'

Clifford continued to nod, carefully increasing the volume of the sound-sweeper.

'They have their own studios and send along a team of analysts and writers to interview us and afterwards book a sanatorium anywhere we like for the convalescence. Eve Corbusier and I decided a small party of five or six would be best.'

'Eve Corbusier,' Clifford repeated. He smiled thinly to himself and

switched on the book he had been reading. 'I wondered when that Gorgon was going to appear.'

'Eve isn't too bad when you get to know her, darling,' Margot told him. 'Don't start reading yet. She'll think up all sorts of weird ideas for the play.' Her voice trailed off. 'What's the matter?'

'Nothing,' Clifford said wearily. 'It's just that I sometimes wonder if you have any sense of responsibility at all.' As Margot's eyes darkened he went on. 'Do you really think that I, a supreme court justice, could take that sort of vacation, even if I wanted to? Those dream plays are packed with advertising commercials and all sorts of corrupt material.' He shook his head sadly. 'And I told you not to go into the Colonial Bazaar.'

'What are we going to do then?' Margot asked coldly. 'Another honeyMoon?'

'I'll reserve a couple of singles tomorrow. Don't worry, you'll enjoy it.' He clipped the hand microphone into his book and began to scan the pages with it, listening to the small metallic voice.

Margot stood up, the vanes in her hat quivering furiously. 'Clifford!' she snapped, her voice dead and menacing. 'I warn you, I'm not going on another honeyMoon!'

Absently, Clifford said: 'Of course, dear,' his fingers racing over the volume control.

'Clifford!'

Her shout sank to an angry squeak. She stepped over to him, her dress blazing like a dragon, jabbering at him noiselessly, the sounds sucked away through the vents over her head and pumped out across the echoing rooftops of the midnight city.

As he sat back quietly in his private vacuum, the ceiling shaking occasionally when Margot slammed a door upstairs, Clifford looked out over the brilliant diadem of down-town Zenith. In the distance, by the space-port, the ascending arcs of hyperliners flared across the sky while below the countless phosphorescent trajectories of hop-cabs enclosed the bowl of rooflight in a dome of glistening hoops.

Of all the cities of the galaxy, few offered such a wealth of pleasures as Zenith, but to Clifford Gorrell it was as distant and unknown as the first Gomorrah. At 35 he was a thin-faced, prematurely ageing man with receding hair and a remote abstracted expression, and in the dark sombre suit and stiff white dog-collar which were the traditional uniform of the Probate Department's senior administrators he looked like a man who had never taken a holiday in his life.

At that moment Clifford wished he hadn't. He and Margot had never been able to agree about their vacations. Clifford's associates and superiors at the Department, all of them ten or twenty years older than himself, took their pleasures conservatively and expected a young but responsible justice to do the same. Margot grudgingly acknowledged this, but her friends who frequented the chic playtime clinics along the beach at Mira

Mira considered the so-called honeyMoon trips back to Earth derisively old-fashioned, a last desperate resort of the aged and infirm.

And to tell the truth, Clifford realized, they were right. He had never dared to admit to Margot that he too was bored because it would have been more than his peace of mind was worth, but a change might do them good.

He resolved – next year.

Margot lay back among the cushions on the terrace divan, listening to the flamingo trees singing to each other in the morning sunlight. Twenty feet below, in the high-walled garden, a tall muscular young man was playing with a jet-ball. He had a dark olive complexion and swarthy good looks, and oil gleamed across his bare chest and arms. Margot watched with malicious amusement his efforts to entertain her. This was Trantino, Margot's play-boy, who chaperoned her during Clifford's long absences at the Probate Department.

'Hey, Margot! Catch!' He gestured with the jet-ball but Margot turned away, feeling her swim-suit slide pleasantly across her smooth tanned skin. The suit was made of one of the newer bioplastic materials, and its living tissues were still growing, softly adapting themselves to the contours of her body, repairing themselves as the fibres became worn or grimy. Upstairs in her wardrobes the gowns and dresses purred on their hangers like the drowsing inmates of some exquisite arboreal zoo. Sometimes she thought of commissioning her little Mercurian tailor to run up a bioplastic suit for Clifford – a specially designed suit that would begin to constrict one night as he stood on the terrace, the lapels growing tighter and tighter around his neck, the sleeves pinning his arms to his sides, the waist contracting to pitch him over –

'Margot!' Trantino interrupted her reverie, sailed the jet-ball expertly through the air towards her. Annoyed, Margot caught it with one hand and pointed it away, watched it sail over the wall and the roofs beyond.

Trantino came up to her. 'What's the matter?' he asked anxiously. For his part he felt his inability to soothe Margot a reflection on his professional skill. The privileges of his caste had to be guarded jealously. For several centuries now the managerial and technocratic elite had been so preoccupied with the work of government that they relied on the Templars of Aphrodite not merely to guard their wives from any marauding suitors but also to keep them amused and contented. By definition, of course, their relationship was platonic, a pleasant revival of the old chivalrous ideals, but sometimes Trantino regretted that the only tools in his armoury were a handful of poems and empty romantic gestures. The Guild of which he was a novitiate member was an ancient and honoured one, and it wouldn't do if Margot began to pine and Mr Gorrell reported him to the Masters of the Guild.

'Why are you always arguing with Mr Gorrell?' Trantino asked her.

One of the Guild's axioms was 'The husband *is always* right.' Any discord between him and his wife was the responsibility of the play-boy.

Margot ignored Trantino's question. 'Those trees are getting on my nerves,' she complained fractiously. 'Why can't they keep quiet?'

'They're mating,' Trantino told her. He added thoughtfully: 'You should sing to Mr Gorrell.'

Margot stirred lazily as the shoulder straps of the sun-suit unclasped themselves behind her back. 'Tino,' she asked, 'what's the most unpleasant thing I could do to Mr Gorrell?'

'Margot!' Trantino gasped, utterly shocked. He decided that an appeal to sentiment, a method of reconciliation despised by the more proficient members of the Guild, was his only hope. 'Remember, Margot, you will always have me.'

He was about to permit himself a melancholy smile when Margot sat up abruptly.

'Don't look so frightened, you fool! I've just got an idea that should make Mr Gorrell sing to me.'

She straightened the vanes in her hat, waited for the sun-suit to clasp itself discreetly around her, then pushed Trantino aside and stalked off the terrace.

Clifford was browsing among the spools in the library, quietly listening to an old 22nd Century abstract on systems of land tenure in the Trianguli.

'Hello, Margot, feel better now?'

Margot smiled at him coyly. 'Clifford, I'm ashamed of myself. Do forgive me.' She bent down and nuzzled his ear. 'Sometimes I'm very selfish. Have you booked our tickets yet?'

Clifford disengaged her arm and straightened his collar. 'I called the agency, but their bookings have been pretty heavy. They've got a double but no singles. We'll have to wait a few days.'

'No, we won't,' Margot exclaimed brightly. 'Clifford, why don't you and I take the double? Then we can really be together, forget all that ship-board nonsense about never having met before.'

Puzzled, Clifford switched off the player. 'What do you mean?'

Margot explained. 'Look, Clifford, I've been thinking that I ought to spend more time with you than I do at present, really share your work and hobbies. I'm tired of all these play-boys.' She drooped languidly against Clifford, her voice silky and reassuring. 'I want to be with you, Clifford. *Always.*'

Clifford pushed her away. 'Don't be silly, Margot,' he said with an anxious laugh. 'You're being absurd.'

'No, I'm not. After all, Harold Kharkov and his wife haven't got a play-boy and she's very happy.'

Maybe she is, Clifford thought, beginning to panic. Kharkov had once been the powerful and ruthless director of the Department of Justice, now was a third-rate attorney hopelessly trying to eke out a meagre living on

the open market, dominated by his wife and forced to spend virtually 24 hours a day with her. For a moment Clifford thought of the days when he had courted Margot, of the long dreadful hours listening to her inane chatter. Trantino's real role was not to chaperone Margot while Clifford was away but while he was at home.

'Margot, be sensible,' he started to say, but she cut him short. 'I've made up my mind, I'm going to tell Trantino to pack his suitcase and go back to the Guild.' She switched on the spool player, selecting the wrong speed, smiling ecstatically as the reading head grated loudly and stripped the coding off the record. 'It's going to be wonderful to share everything with you. Why don't we forget about the vacation this year?'

A facial tic from which Clifford had last suffered at the age of ten began to twitch ominously.

Tony Harcourt, Clifford's personal assistant, came over to the Gorrells' villa immediately after lunch. He was a brisk, polished young man, barely controlling his annoyance at being called back to work on the first day of his vacation. He had carefully booked a sleeper next to Dolores Costane, the most beautiful of the Jovian Heresiarch's vestals, on board a leisure-liner leaving that afternoon for Venus, but instead of enjoying the fruits of weeks of blackmail and intrigue he was having to take part in what seemed a quite uncharacteristic piece of Gorrell whimsy.

He listened in growing bewilderment as Clifford explained.

'We were going to one of our usual resorts on Luna, Tony, but we've decided we need a change. Margot wants a vacation that's different. Something new, exciting, original. So go round all the agencies and bring me their suggestions.'

'All the agencies?' Tony queried. 'Don't you mean just the registered ones?'

'All of them,' Margot told him smugly, relishing every moment of her triumph.

Clifford nodded, and smiled at Margot benignly.

'But there must be 50 or 60 agencies organizing vacations,' Tony protested. 'Only about a dozen of them are accredited. Outside Empyrean Tours and Union-Galactic there'll be absolutely nothing suitable for you.'

'Never mind,' Clifford said blandly. 'We only want an idea of the field. I'm sorry, Tony, but I don't want this all over the Department and I know you'll be discreet.'

Tony groaned. 'It'll take me weeks.'

'Three days,' Clifford told him. 'Margot and I want to leave here by the end of the week.' He looked longingly over his shoulder for the absent Trantino. 'Believe me, Tony, we really need a holiday.'

Fifty-six travel and vacation agencies were listed in the Commercial Directory, Tony discovered when he returned to his office in the top

floor of the Justice building in downtown Zenith, all but eight of them alien. The Department had initiated legal proceedings against five, three had closed down, and eight more were fronts for other enterprises.

That left him with forty to visit, spread all over the Upper and Lower Cities and in the Colonial Bazaar, attached to various mercantile, religious and paramilitary organizations, some of them huge concerns with their own police and ecclesiastical forces, others sharing a one-room office and transceiver with a couple of other shoestring firms.

Tony mapped out an itinerary, slipped a flask of Five-Anchor Neptunian Rum into his hip pocket and dialled a helicab.

The first was ARCO PRODUCTIONS INC., a large establishment occupying three levels and a bunker on the fashionable west side of the Upper City. According to the Directory they specialized in hunting and shooting expeditions.

The helicab put him down on the apron outside the entrance. Massive steel columns reached up to a reinforced concrete portico, and the whole place looked less like a travel agency than the last redoubt of some interstellar Seigfreid. As he went in a smart jackbooted guard of janissaries in black and silver uniforms snapped to attention and presented arms.

Everyone inside the building was wearing a uniform, moving about busily at standby alert. A huge broad-shouldered woman with sergeant's stripes handed Tony over to a hard-faced Martian colonel.

'I'm making some inquiries on behalf of a wealthy Terran and his wife,' Tony explained. 'They thought they'd do a little big-game hunting on their vacation this year. I believe you organize expeditions.'

The colonel nodded curtly and led Tony over to a broad map-table. 'Certainly. What exactly have they in mind?'

'Well, nothing really. They hoped you'd make some suggestions.'

'Of course.' The colonel pulled out a memo-tape. 'Have they their own air and land forces?'

Tony shook his head. 'I'm afraid not.'

'I see. Can you tell me whether they will require a single army corps, a combined task force or –'

'No,' Tony said. 'Nothing as big as that.'

'An assault party of brigade strength? I understand. Quieter and less elaborate. All the fashion today.' He switched on the star-map and spread his hands across the glimmering screen of stars and nebulae. 'Now the question of the particular theatre. At present only three of the game reserves have open seasons. Firstly the Procyon system; this includes about 20 different races, some of them still with only atomic technologies. Unfortunately there's been a good deal of dispute recently about declaring Procyon a game reserve, and the Resident of Alschain is trying to have it admitted to the Pan-Galactic Conference. A pity, I feel,' the colonel added, reflectively stroking his steel-grey moustache. 'Procyon always put up a great fight against us and an expedition there was invariably lively.'

Tony nodded sympathetically. 'I hadn't realized they objected.'

The colonel glanced at him sharply. 'Naturally,' he said. He cleared his throat. 'That leaves only the Ketab tribes of Ursa Major, who are having their Millennial Wars, and the Sudor Martines of Orion. They are an entirely new reserve, and your best choice without doubt. The ruling dynasty died out recently, and a war of succession could be conveniently arranged.'

Tony was no longer following the colonel, but he smiled intelligently.

'Now,' the colonel asked, 'what political or spiritual creeds do your friends wish to have invoked?'

Tony frowned. 'I don't think they want any. Are they absolutely necessary?'

The colonel regarded Tony carefully. 'No,' he said slowly. 'It's a question of taste. A purely military operation is perfectly feasible. However, we always advise our clients to invoke some doctrine as a *casus belli*, not only to avoid adverse publicity and any feelings of guilt or remorse, but to lend colour and purpose to the campaign. Each of our field commanders specializes in a particular ideological pogrom, with the exception of General Westerling. Perhaps your friends would prefer him?'

Tony's mind started to work again. 'Schapiro Westerling? The former Director-General of Graves Commission?'

The colonel nodded. 'You know him?'

Tony laughed. 'Know him? I thought I was prosecuting him at the current Nova Trials. I can see that we're well behind with the times.' He pushed back his chair. 'To tell the truth I don't think you've anything suitable for my friends. Thanks all the same.'

The colonel stiffened. One of his hands moved below the desk and a buzzer sounded along the wall.

'However,' Tony added, 'I'd be grateful if you'd send them further details.'

The colonel sat impassively in his chair. Three enormous guards appeared at Tony's elbow, idly swinging energy truncheons.

'Clifford Gorrell, Stellar Probate Division, Department of Justice,' Tony said quickly.

He gave the colonel a brief smile and made his way out, cursing Clifford and walking warily across the thickly piled carpet in case it had been mined.

The next one on his list was the A-Z JOLLY JUBILEE COMPANY, alien and unregistered, head office somewhere out of Betelgeuse. According to the Directory they specialized in 'all-in cultural parties and guaranteed somatic weekends.' Their premises occupied the top two tiers of a hanging garden in the Colonial Bazaar. They sounded harmless enough but Tony was ready for them.

'No,' he said firmly to a lovely Antarean wraith-fern who shyly raised a frond to him as he crossed the terrace. 'Not today.'

Behind the bar a fat man in an asbestos suit was feeding sand to a siliconic fire-fish swimming round in a pressure brazier.

'Damn things,' he grumbled, wiping the sweat off his chin and fiddling aimlessly with the thermostat. 'They gave me a booklet when I got it, but it doesn't say anything about it eating a whole beach every day.' He spaded in another couple of shovels from a low dune of sand heaped on the floor behind him. 'You have to keep them at exactly 5750°K. or they start getting nervous. Can I help you?'

'I thought there was a vacation agency here,' Tony said.

'Sure. I'll call the girls for you.' He pressed a bell.

'Wait a minute,' Tony cut in. 'You advertise something about cultural parties. What exactly are they?'

The fat man chuckled. 'That must be my partner. He's a professor at Vega Tech. Likes to keep the tone up.' He winked at Tony.

Tony sat on one of the stools, looking out over the crazy spiral roof-tops of the Bazaar. A mile away the police patrols circled over the big apartment batteries which marked the perimeter of the Bazaar, keeping their distance.

A tall slim woman appeared from behind the foliage and sauntered across the terrace to him. She was a Canopan slave, hot-housed out of imported germ, a slender green-skinned beauty with moth-like fluttering gills.

The fat man introduced Tony. 'Lucille, take him up to the arbour and give him a run through.'

Tony tried to protest but the pressure brazier was hissing fiercely. The fat man started feeding sand in furiously, the exhaust flames flaring across the terrace.

Quickly, Tony turned and backed up the stairway to the arbour. 'Lucille,' he reminded her firmly, 'this is strictly cultural, remember.'

Half an hour later a dull boom reverberated up from the terrace.

'Poor Jumbo,' Lucille said sadly as a fine rain of sand came down over them.

'Poor Jumbo,' Tony agreed, sitting back and playing with a coil of her hair. Like a soft sinuous snake, it circled around his arm, sleek with blue oil. He drained the flask of Five-Anchor and tossed it lightly over the balustrade. 'Now tell me more about these Canopan prayerbeds . . .'

When, after two days, Tony reported back to the Gorrells he looked hollow-eyed and exhausted, like a man who had been brain-washed by the Wardens.

'What happened to you?' Margot asked anxiously, 'we thought you'd been going round the agencies.'

'Exactly,' Tony said. He slumped down in a sofa and tossed a thick folder across to Clifford. 'Take your pick. You've got about 250 schemes there in complete detail, but I've written out a synopsis which gives one

or two principal suggestions from each agency. Most of them are out of the question.'

Clifford unclipped the synopsis and started to read through it.

(1) ARCO PRODUCTIONS INC. Unregistered. Private subsidiary of Sagittarius Security Police.

Hunting and shooting. Your own war to order. Raiding parties, revolutions, religious crusades. In anything from a small commando squad to a 3,000-ship armada. ARCO provide publicity, mock War Crimes Tribunal, etc. Samples:

(a) Operation Torquemada. 23-day expedition to Bellatrix IV. 20 ship assault corps under Admiral Storm Wengen. Mission: liberation of (imaginary) Terran hostages. Cost: 300,000 credits.

(b) Operation Klingsor. 15-year crusade against Ursa Major. Combined task force of 2,500 ships. Mission: recovery of runic memory dials stolen from client's shrine.

Cost: 500 billion credits (ARCO will arrange lend-lease but this is dabbling in realpolitik).

(2) ARENA FEATURES INC. Unregistered. Organizers of the Pan-Galactic Tournament held tri-millennially at the Sun Bowl 2-Heliopolis, NGC 3599.

Every conceivable game in the Cosmos is played at the tournament and so formidable is the opposition that a winning contestant can virtually choose his own apotheosis. The challenge round of the Solar Megathlon Group 3 (that is, for any being whose function can be described, however loosely, as living) involves Quantum Jumping, 7-dimensional Maze Ball and Psychokinetic Bridge (pretty tricky against a telepathic Ketos D'Oma). The only Terran ever to win an event was the redoubtable Chippy Yerkes of Altair 5 The Clowns, who introduced the unplayable blank Round Dice. Being a spectator is as exhausting as being a contestant, and you're well advised to substitute.

Cost: 100,000 credits/day.

(3) AGENCE GENERALE DE TOURISME. Registered. Venus.

Concessionaires for the Colony Beatific on Lake Virgo, the Mandrake Casino Circuit and the Miramar-Trauma Senso-channels. Dream-baths, vu-dromes, endocrine-galas. Darleen Costello is the current Aphrodite and Laurence Mandell makes a versatile Lothario. Plug into these two from 30:30 VST.Room and non-denominational bath at the Gomorrah-Plaza on Mount Venus comes to 1,000 credits a day, but remember to keep out of the Zone. It's just too erotogenous for a Terran.

(4) TERMINAL TOURS LTD. Unregistered. Earth.
For those who want to get away from it all the *Dream of Osiris*, an astral-rigged, 1,000-foot leisure-liner is now fitting out for the Grand Tour. Round-cosmos cruise, visiting every known race and galaxy.

Cost: Doubles at a flat billion, but it's cheap when you realize that the cruise lasts for ever and you'll never be back.

(5) SLEEP TRADERS. Unregistered.
A somewhat shadowy group who handle all dealings on the Blue Market, acting as a general clearing house and buying and selling dreams all through the Galaxy.

Sample: Like to try a really new sort of dream? The Set Corrani Priests of Theta Piscium will link you up with the sacred electronic thought-pools in the Desert of Kish. These mercury lakes are their ancestral memory banks. Surgery is necessary but be careful. Too much cortical damage and the archetypes may get restive. In return one of the Set Corrani (polysexual delta-humanoids about the size of a walking dragline) will take over your cerebral functions for a long weekend. All these transactions are done on an exchange basis and SLEEP TRADERS charge nothing for the service. But they obviously get a rake-off, and may pump advertising into the lower medullary centres. Whatever they're selling I wouldn't advise anybody to buy.

(6) THE AGENCY. Registered. M33 in Andromeda.
The executive authority of the consortium of banking trusts floating Schedule D, the fourth draw of the gigantic PK pyramid lottery sweeping all through the continuum from Sol III out to the island universes. Trance-cells everywhere are now recruiting dream-readers and ESPerceptionists, and there's still time to buy a ticket. There's only one number on all the tickets – the winning one – but don't think that means you'll get away with the kitty. THE AGENCY has just launched UNILIV, the emergency relief fund for victims of Schedule C who lost their deposits and are now committed to paying off impossible debts, some monetary, some moral (if you're unlucky in the draw you may find yourself landed with a guilt complex that would make even a Colonus Rex look sad).

Cost: 1 credit – but with an evaluation in the billions if you have to forfeit.

(7) ARCTURIAN EXPRESS. Unregistered.
Controls all important track events. The racing calendar this year is a causal and not a temporal one and seems a little obscure, but most of the established classics are taking place.

(a) The Rhinosaur Derby. Held this year at Betelgeuse Springs under the rules of the Federation of Amorphs. First to the light horizon. There's always quite a line-up for this one and any form of vehicle is allowed – rockets, beams, racial migrations, ES thought patterns – but frankly it's

a waste of effort. It's not just that by the time you're out of your own sight you're usually out of your mind as well, but the Nils of Rigel, who always enter a strong team, are capable of instantaneous transmission.

(b) The Paraplegic Handicap. Recently instituted by the Protists of Lambda Scorpio. The course measures only 0.00015 mm, but that's a long way to urge an Aldebaran Torpid. They are giant viruses embedded in bauxite mountains, and by varying their pressure differentials it's sometimes possible to tickle them into a little life. K 2 on Regulus IX is holding the big bets, but even so the race is estimated to take about 50,000 years to run.

(8) NEW FUTURES INC. Unregistered.

Tired of the same dull round? NEW FUTURES will take you right out of this world. In the island universes the continuum is extra-dimensional, and the time channels are controlled by rival cartels. The element of chance apparently plays the time role, and it's all even more confused by the fact that you may be moving around in someone else's extrapolation.

In the tourist translation manual 185 basic tenses are given, and of these 125 are future conditional. No verb conjugates in the present tense, and you can invent and copyright your own irregulars. This may explain why I got the impression at the bureau that they were only half there.

Cost: simultaneously 3,270 and 2,000,000 credits. They refuse to quibble.

(9) SEVEN SIRENS. Registered. Venus.

A subsidiary of the fashion trust controlling senso-channel Astral Eve.

Ladies, like to win your own beauty contest? Twenty-five of the most beautiful creatures in the Galaxy are waiting to pit their charms against yours, but however divine they may be – and two or three of them, such as the Flamen Zilla Quel-Queen (75–9–25) and the Orthodox Virgin of Altair (76–953–?) certainly will be – they'll stand no chance against you. Your specifications will be defined as the ideal ones.

(10) GENERAL ENTERPRISES. Registered.

Specialists in culture cycles, world struggles, ethnic trends. Organize vacations as a sideline. A vast undertaking for whom ultimately we all work. Their next venture, epoch-making by all accounts, is starting now, and everybody will be coming along. I was politely but firmly informed that it was no use worrying about the cost. When I asked –

Before Clifford could finish one of the houseboys came up to him.

'Priority Call for you, sir.'

Clifford handed the synopsis to Margot. 'Tell me if you find anything. It looks to me as if we've been wasting Tony's time.'

He left them and went through to his study.

'Ah, Gorrell, there you are.' It was Thornwall Harrison, the attorney

who had taken over Clifford's office. 'Who the hell are all these people trailing in to see you night and day? The place looks like Colonial Night at the Arena Circus. I can't get rid of them.'

'Which people?' Clifford asked. 'What do they want?'

'You apparently,' Thornwall told him. 'Most of them thought I was you. They've been trying to sell me all sorts of crazy vacation schemes. I said you'd already gone on your vacation and I myself never took one. Then one of them pulled a hypodermic on me. There's even an Anti-Cartel agent sleuthing around, wants to see you about block bookings. Thinks you're a racketeer.'

Back in the lounge Margot and Tony were looking out through the terrace windows into the boulevard which ran from the Gorrells' villa to the level below.

A long column of vehicles had pulled up under the trees: trucks, half-tracks, huge Telesenso studio location vans and several sleek white ambulances. The drivers and crew-men were standing about in little groups in the shadows, quietly watching the villa. Two or three radar scanners on the vans were rotating, and as Clifford looked down a convoy of trucks drove up and joined the tail of the column.

'Looks like there's going to be quite a party,' Tony said. 'What are they waiting for?'

'Perhaps they've come for us?' Margot suggested excitedly.

'They're wasting their time if they have,' Clifford told her. He swung round on Tony. 'Did you give our names to any of the agencies?'

Tony hesitated, then nodded. 'I couldn't help it. Some of those outfits wouldn't take no for an answer.'

Clifford clamped his lips and picked the synopsis off the floor. 'Well, Margot, have you decided where you want to go?'

Margot fiddled with the synopsis. 'There are so many to choose from.'

Tony started for the door. 'Well, I'll leave you to it.' He waved a hand at them. 'Have fun.'

'Hold on,' Clifford told him. 'Margot hasn't made up her mind yet.'

'What's the hurry?' Tony asked. He indicated the line of vehicles outside, their crews now climbing into their driving cabs and turrets. 'Take your time. You may bite off more than you can chew.'

'Exactly. So as soon as Margot decides where we're going you can make the final arrangements for us and get rid of that menagerie.'

'But Clifford, give me a chance.'

'Sorry. Now Margot, hurry up.'

Margot flipped through the synopsis, screwing up her mouth. 'It's so difficult, Clifford, I don't really like any of these. I still think the best agency was the little one I found in the Bazaar.'

'No,' Tony groaned, sinking down on a sofa. 'Margot, please, after all the trouble I've gone to.'

'Yes, definitely that one. The dream bureau. What was it called –'

Before she could finish there was a roar of engines starting up in the boulevard. Startled, Clifford saw the column of cars and trucks churn across the gravel towards the villa. Music, throbbing heavily, came down from the room above, and a sick musky odour seeped through the air.

Tony pulled himself off the sofa. 'They must have had this place wired,' he said quickly. 'You'd better call the police. Believe me, some of these people don't waste time arguing.'

Outside three helmeted men in brown uniforms ran past the terrace, unwinding a coil of fuse wire. The sharp hissing sound of para-rays sucked through the air from the drive.

Margot hid back in her slumber seat. 'Trantino!' she wailed.

Clifford went back into his study. He switched the transceiver to the emergency channel.

Instead of the police signal a thin automatic voice beeped through. 'Remain seated, remain seated. Take-off in zero two minutes, Purser's office on G Deck now –'

Clifford switched to another channel. There was a blare of studio applause and a loud unctuous voice called out:

'And now over to brilliant young Clifford Gorrell and his charming wife Margot about to enter their dream-pool at the fabulous Riviera-Neptune. Are you there, Cliff?'

Angrily, Clifford turned to a third. Static and morse chattered, and then someone rapped out in a hard iron tone: 'Colonel Sapt is dug in behind the swimming pool. Enfilade along the garage roof –'

Clifford gave up. He went back to the lounge. The music was deafening. Margot was prostrate in her slumber-seat, Tony down on the floor by the window, watching a pitched battle raging in the drive. Heavy black palls of smoke drifted across the terrace, and two tanks with stylized archers emblazoned on their turrets were moving up past the burning wrecks of the studio location vans.

'They must be Arco's!' Tony shouted. 'The police will look after them, but wait until the extra-sensory gang take over!'

Crouching behind a low stone parapet running off the terrace was a group of waiters in dishevelled evening dress, lab technicians in scorched white overalls and musicians clutching their instrument cases. A bolt of flame from one of the tanks flickered over their heads and crashed into the grove of flamingo trees, sending up a shower of sparks and broken notes.

Clifford pulled Tony to his feet. 'Come on, we've got to get out of here. We'll try the library windows into the garden. You'd better take Margot.'

Her yellow beach robe had apparently died of shock, and was beginning to blacken like a dried-out banana skin. Discreetly averting his eyes, Tony picked her up and followed Clifford out into the hall.

Three croupiers in gold uniforms were arguing hotly with two men in white surgeons' coats. Behind them a couple of mechanics were struggling a huge vibrobath up the stairs.

The foreman came over to Clifford. 'Gorrell?' he asked, consulting an invoice. 'Trans-Ocean.' He jerked a thumb at the bath. 'Where do you want it?'

A surgeon elbowed him aside. 'Mr Gorrell?' he asked suavely. 'We are from Cerebro-Tonic Travel. Please allow me to give you a sedative. All this noise –'

Clifford pushed past him and started to walk down the corridor to the library, but the floor began to slide and weave.

He stopped and looked around unsteadily.

Tony was down on his knees, Margot flopped out of his arms across the floor.

Someone swayed up to Clifford and held out a tray.

On it were three tickets.

Around him the walls whirled.

He woke in his bedroom, lying comfortably on his back, gently breathing a cool amber air. The noise had died away, but he could still hear a vortex of sound spinning violently in the back of his mind. It spiralled away, vanished, and he moved his head and looked around.

Margot was lying asleep beside him, and for a moment he thought that the attack on the house had been a dream. Then he noticed the skull-plate clamped over his head, and the cables leading off from a boom to a large console at the foot of the bed. Massive spools loaded with magnetic tape waited in the projector ready to be played.

The real nightmare was still to come! He struggled to get up, found himself clamped in a twilight sleep, unable to move more than a few centimetres.

He lay there powerlessly for ten minutes, tongue clogging his mouth like a wad of cotton-wool when he tried to shout. Eventually a small neatly featured alien in a pink silk suit opened the door and padded quietly over to them. He peered down at their faces and then turned a couple of knobs on the console.

Clifford's consciousness began to clear. Beside him Margot stirred and woke.

The alien beamed down pleasantly. 'Good evening,' he greeted them in a smooth creamy voice. 'Please allow me to apologize for any discomfort you have suffered. However, the first day of a vacation is often a little confused.'

Margot sat up. 'I remember you. You're from the little bureau in the Bazaar.' She jumped round happily. 'Clifford!'

The alien bowed. 'Of course, Mrs Gorrell. I am Dr Terence Sotal-2 Burlington, Professor – Emeritus,' he added to himself as an afterthought, '– of Applied Drama at the University of Alpha Leporis, and

the director of the play you and your husband are to perform during your vacation.'

Clifford cut in: 'Would you release me from this machine immediately? And then get out of my house! I've had –'

'Clifford!' Margot snapped. 'What's the matter with you?'

Clifford dragged at the skull plate and Dr Burlington quietly moved a control on the console. Part of Clifford's brain clouded and he sank back helplessly.

'Everything is all right, Mr Gorrell,' Dr Burlington said.

'Clifford,' Margot warned him. 'Remember your promise.' She smiled at Dr Burlington. 'Don't pay any attention to him, Doctor. Please go on.'

'Thank you, Mrs Gorrell.' Dr Burlington bowed again, as Clifford lay half-asleep, groaning impotently.

'The play we have designed for you,' Dr Burlington explained, 'is an adaptation of a classic masterpiece in the Diphenyl 2-4-6 Cyclopropane canon, and though based on the oldest of human situations, is nonetheless fascinating. It was recently declared the outright winner at the Mira Nuptial Contest, and will always have a proud place in the private repertoires. To you, I believe, it is known as "The Taming of the Shrew".'

Margot giggled and then looked surprised. Dr Burlington smiled urbanely. 'However, allow me to show you the script.' He excused himself and slipped out.

Margot fretted anxiously, while Clifford pulled weakly at the skull-plate.

'Clifford, I'm not sure that I like this altogether. And Dr Burlington does seem rather strange. But I suppose it's only for three weeks.'

Just then the door opened and a stout bearded figure, erect in a stiff blue uniform, white yachting cap jauntily on his head, stepped in.

'Good evening, Mrs Gorrell.' He saluted Margot smartly, 'Captain Linstrom.' He looked down at Clifford. 'Good to have you aboard, sir.'

'Aboard?' Clifford repeated weakly. He looked around at the familiar furniture in the room, the curtains drawn neatly over the windows. 'What are you raving about? Get out of my house!'

The Captain chuckled. 'Your husband has a sense of humour, Mrs Gorrell. A useful asset on these long trips. Your friend Mr Harcourt in the next cabin seems sadly lacking in one.'

'Tony?' Margot exclaimed. 'Is he still here?'

Captain Linstrom laughed. 'I quite understand you. He seems very worried, quite over-eager to return to Mars. We shall be passing there one day, of course, though not I fear for some time. However, time is no longer a consideration to you. I believe you are to spend the entire voyage in sleep. But a very pleasantly coloured sleep nonetheless.' He smiled roguishly at Margot.

As he reached the door Clifford managed to gasp out: 'Where are we? For heaven's sake, call the police!'

Captain Linstrom paused in surprise. 'But surely you know, Mr Gorrell?' He strode to the window and flung back the curtains. In place of the large square casement were three small portholes. Outside a blaze of incandescent light flashed by, a rush of stars and nebulae.

Captain Linstrom gestured theatrically. 'This is the *Dream of Osiris*, under charter to Terminal Tours, three hours out from Zenith City on the non-stop run. May I wish you sweet dreams!'

1962

THE CAGE OF SAND

At sunset, when the vermilion glow reflected from the dunes along the horizon fitfully illuminated the white faces of the abandoned hotels, Bridgman stepped on to his balcony and looked out over the long stretches of cooling sand as the tides of purple shadow seeped across them. Slowly, extending their slender fingers through the shallow saddles and depressions, the shadows massed together like gigantic combs, a few phosphorescing spurs of obsidian isolated for a moment between the tines, and then finally coalesced and flooded in a solid wave across the half-submerged hotels. Behind the silent façades, in the tilting sand-filled streets which had once glittered with cocktail bars and restaurants, it was already night. Haloes of moonlight beaded the lamp-standards with silver dew, and draped the shuttered windows and slipping cornices like a frost of frozen gas.

As Bridgman watched, his lean bronzed arms propped against the rusting rail, the last whorls of light sank away into the cerise funnel withdrawing below the horizon, and the first wind stirred across the dead Martian sand. Here and there miniature cyclones whirled about a sand-spur, drawing off swirling feathers of moon-washed spray, and a nimbus of white dust swept across the dunes and settled in the dips and hollows. Gradually the drifts accumulated, edging towards the former shoreline below the hotels. Already the first four floors had been inundated, and the sand now reached up to within two feet of Bridgman's balcony. After the next sandstorm he would be forced yet again to move to the floor above.

'Bridgman!'

The voice cleft the darkness like a spear. Fifty yards to his right, at the edge of the derelict sand-break he had once attempted to build below the hotel, a square stocky figure wearing a pair of frayed cotton shorts waved up at him. The moonlight etched the broad sinewy muscles of his chest, the powerful bowed legs sinking almost to their calves in the soft Martian sand. He was about forty-five years old, his thinning hair close-cropped so that he seemed almost bald. In his right hand he carried a large canvas hold-all.

Bridgman smiled to himself. Standing there patiently in the moonlight below the derelict hotel, Travis reminded him of some long-delayed tourist arriving at a ghost resort years after its extinction.

'Bridgman, are you coming?' When the latter still leaned on his balcony rail, Travis added: 'The next conjunction is tomorrow.'

Bridgman shook his head, a rictus of annoyance twisting his mouth. He hated the bi-monthly conjunctions, when all seven of the derelict satellite capsules still orbiting the Earth crossed the sky together. Invariably on these nights he remained in his room, playing over the old memo-tapes he had salvaged from the submerged chalets and motels further along the beach (the hysterical 'This is Mamie Goldberg, 62955 Cocoa Boulevard, I really wanna protest against this crazy evacuation . . .' or resigned 'Sam Snade here, the Pontiac convertible in the back garage belongs to anyone who can dig it out'). Travis and Louise Woodward always came to the hotel on the conjunction nights – it was the highest building in the resort, with an unrestricted view from horizon to horizon – and would follow the seven converging stars as they pursued their endless courses around the globe. Both would be oblivious of everything else, which the wardens knew only too well, and they reserved their most careful searches of the sand-sea for these bi-monthly occasions. Invariably Bridgman found himself forced to act as look-out for the other two.

'I was out last night,' he called down to Travis. 'Keep away from the north-east perimeter fence by the Cape. They'll be busy repairing the track.'

Most nights Bridgman divided his time between excavating the buried motels for caches of supplies (the former inhabitants of the resort area had assumed the government would soon rescind its evacuation order) and disconnecting the sections of metal roadway laid across the desert for the wardens' jeeps. Each of the squares of wire mesh was about five yards wide and weighed over three hundred pounds. After he had snapped the lines of rivets, dragged the sections away and buried them among the dunes he would be exhausted, and spend most of the next day nursing his strained hands and shoulders. Some sections of the track were now permanently anchored with heavy steel stakes, and he knew that sooner or later they would be unable to delay the wardens by sabotaging the roadway.

Travis hesitated, and with a noncommittal shrug disappeared among the dunes, the heavy tool-bag swinging easily from one powerful arm. Despite the meagre diet which sustained him, his energy and determination seemed undiminished – in a single night Bridgman had watched him dismantle twenty sections of track and then loop together the adjacent limbs of a crossroad, sending an entire convoy of six vehicles off into the wastelands to the south.

Bridgman turned from the balcony, then stopped when a faint tang of brine touched the cool air. Ten miles away, hidden by the lines of dunes, was the sea, the long green rollers of the middle Atlantic breaking against the red Martian strand. When he had first come to the beach five years earlier there had never been the faintest scent of brine across the intervening miles of sand. Slowly, however, the Atlantic was driving the shore back to its former margins. The tireless shoulder of the Gulf Stream

drummed against the soft Martian dust and piled the dunes into grotesque rococo reefs which the wind carried away into the sand-sea. Gradually the ocean was returning, reclaiming its great smooth basin, sifting out the black quartz and Martian obsidian which would never be wind-borne and drawing these down into its deeps. More and more often the stain of brine would hang on the evening air, reminding Bridgman why he had first come to the beach and removing any inclination to leave.

Three years earlier he had attempted to measure the rate of approach, by driving a series of stakes into the sand at the water's edge, but the shifting contours of the dunes carried away the coloured poles. Later, using the promontory at Cape Canaveral, where the old launching gantries and landing ramps reared up into the sky like derelict pieces of giant sculpture, he had calculated by triangulation that the advance was little more than thirty yards per year. At this rate – without wanting to, he had automatically made the calculation – it would be well over five hundred years before the Atlantic reached its former littoral at Cocoa Beach. Though discouragingly slow, the movement was nonetheless in a forward direction, and Bridgman was happy to remain in his hotel ten miles away across the dunes, conceding towards its time of arrival the few years he had at his disposal.

Later, shortly after Louise Woodward's arrival, he had thought of dismantling one of the motel cabins and building himself a small chalet by the water's edge. But the shoreline had been too dismal and forbidding. The great red dunes rolled on for miles, cutting off half the sky, dissolving slowly under the impact of the slate-green water. There was no formal tide-line, but only a steep shelf littered with nodes of quartz and rusting fragments of Mars rockets brought back with the ballast. He spent a few days in a cave below a towering sand-reef, watching the long galleries of compacted red dust crumble and dissolve as the cold Atlantic stream sluiced through them, collapsing like the decorated colonnades of a baroque cathedral. In the summer the heat reverberated from the hot sand as from the slag of some molten sun, burning the rubber soles from his boots, and the light from the scattered flints of washed quartz flickered with diamond hardness. Bridgman had returned to the hotel grateful for his room overlooking the silent dunes.

Leaving the balcony, the sweet smell of brine still in his nostrils, he went over to the desk. A small cone of shielded light shone down over the tape-recorder and rack of spools. The rumble of the wardens' unsilenced engines always gave him at least five minutes' warning of their arrival, and it would have been safe to install another lamp in the room – there were no roadways between the hotel and the sea, and from a distance any light reflected on to the balcony was indistinguishable from the corona of glimmering phosphors which hung over the sand like myriads of fire-flies. However, Bridgman preferred to sit in the darkened suite, enclosed by the circle of books on the makeshift shelves, the shadow-filled air playing over

his shoulders through the long night as he toyed with the memo-tapes, fragments of a vanished and unregretted past. By day he always drew the blinds, immolating himself in a world of perpetual twilight.

Bridgman had easily adapted himself to his self-isolation, soon evolved a system of daily routines that gave him the maximum of time to spend on his private reveries. Pinned to the walls around him were a series of huge white-prints and architectural drawings, depicting various elevations of a fantastic Martian city he had once designed, its glass spires and curtain walls rising like heliotropic jewels from the vermilion desert. In fact, the whole city was a vast piece of jewellery, each elevation brilliantly visualized but as symmetrical, and ultimately as lifeless, as a crown. Bridgman continually retouched the drawings, inserting more and more details, so that they almost seemed to be photographs of an original.

Most of the hotels in the town – one of a dozen similar resorts buried by the sand which had once formed an unbroken strip of motels, chalets and five-star hotels thirty miles to the south of Cape Canaveral – were well stocked with supplies of canned food abandoned when the area was evacuated and wired off. There were ample reservoirs and cisterns filled with water, apart from a thousand intact cocktail bars six feet below the surface of the sand. Travis had excavated a dozen of these in search of his favourite vintage bourbon. Walking out across the desert behind the town one would suddenly find a short flight of steps cut into the annealed sand and crawl below an occluded sign announcing 'The Satellite Bar' or 'The Orbit Room' into the inner sanctum, where the jutting deck of a chromium bar had been cleared as far as the diamond-paned mirror freighted with its rows of bottles and figurines. Bridgman would have been glad to see them left undisturbed.

The whole trash of amusement arcades and cheap bars on the outskirts of the beach resorts were a depressing commentary on the original space-flights, reducing them to the level of monster side-shows at a carnival.

Outside his room, steps sounded along the corridor, then slowly climbed the stairway, pausing for a few seconds at every landing. Bridgman lowered the memo-tape in his hand, listening to the familiar tired footsteps. This was Louise Woodward, making her invariable evening ascent to the roof ten storeys above. Bridgman glanced at the timetable pinned to the wall. Only two of the satellites would be visible, between 12.25 and 12.35 a.m., at an elevation of 62 degrees in the south-west, passing through Cetus and Eridanus, neither of them containing her husband. Although the siting was two hours away, she was already taking up her position, and would remain there until dawn.

Bridgman listened wanly to the feet recede slowly up the stairwell. All through the night the slim, pale-faced woman would sit out under the moon-lit sky, as the soft Martian sand her husband had given his life to reach sifted around her in the dark wind, stroking her faded hair like some mourning mariner's wife waiting for the sea to surrender her

husband's body. Travis usually joined her later, and the two of them sat side by side against the elevator house, the frosted letters of the hotel's neon sign strewn around their feet like the fragments of a dismembered zodiac, then at dawn made their way down into the shadow-filled streets to their eyries in the nearby hotels.

Initially Bridgman often joined their nocturnal vigil, but after a few nights he began to feel something repellent, if not actually ghoulish, about their mindless contemplation of the stars. This was not so much because of the macabre spectacle of the dead astronauts orbiting the planet in their capsules, but because of the curious sense of unspoken communion between Travis and Louise Woodward, almost as if they were celebrating a private rite to which Bridgman could never be initiated. Whatever their original motives, Bridgman sometimes suspected that these had been overlaid by other, more personal ones.

Ostensibly, Louise Woodward was watching her husband's satellite in order to keep alive his memory, but Bridgman guessed that the memories she unconsciously wished to perpetuate were those of herself twenty years earlier, when her husband had been a celebrity and she herself courted by magazine columnists and TV reporters. For fifteen years after his death – Woodward had been killed testing a new lightweight launching platform – she had lived a nomadic existence, driving restlessly in her cheap car from motel to motel across the continent, following her husband's star as it disappeared into the eastern night, and had at last made her home at Cocoa Beach in sight of the rusting gantries across the bay.

Travis's real motives were probably more complex. To Bridgman, after they had known each other for a couple of years, he had confided that he felt himself bound by a debt of honour to maintain a watch over the dead astronauts for the example of courage and sacrifice they had set him as a child (although most of them had been piloting their wrecked capsules for fifty years before Travis's birth), and that now they were virtually forgotten he must singlehandedly keep alive the fading flame of their memory. Bridgman was convinced of his sincerity.

Yet later, going through a pile of old news magazines in the trunk of a car he excavated from a motel port, he came across a picture of Travis wearing an aluminium pressure suit and learned something more of his story. Apparently Travis had at one time himself been an astronaut – or rather, a would-be astronaut. A test pilot for one of the civilian agencies setting up orbital relay stations, his nerve had failed him a few seconds before the last 'hold' of his countdown, a moment of pure unexpected funk that cost the company some five million dollars.

Obviously it was his inability to come to terms with this failure of character, unfortunately discovered lying flat on his back on a contour couch two hundred feet above the launching pad, which had brought Travis to Canaveral, the abandoned Mecca of the first heroes of astronautics.

Tactfully Bridgman had tried to explain that no one would blame him

for this failure of nerve – less his responsibility than that of the selectors who had picked him for the flight, or at least the result of an unhappy concatenation of ambiguously worded multiple-choice questions (crosses in the wrong boxes, some heavier to bear and harder to open than others! Bridgman had joked sardonically to himself). But Travis seemed to have reached his own decision about himself. Night after night, he watched the brilliant funerary convoy weave its gilded pathway towards the dawn sun, salving his own failure by identifying it with the greater, but blameless, failure of the seven astronauts. Travis still wore his hair in the regulation 'mohican' cut of the space-man, still kept himself in perfect physical trim by the vigorous routines he had practised before his abortive flight. Sustained by the personal myth he had created, he was now more or less unreachable.

'Dear Harry, I've taken the car and deposit box. Sorry it should end like –'

Irritably, Bridgman switched off the memo-tape and its recapitulation of some thirty-year-old private triviality. For some reason he seemed unable to accept Travis and Louise Woodward for what they were. He disliked this failure of compassion, a nagging compulsion to expose other people's motives and strip away the insulating sheaths around their naked nerve strings, particularly as his own motives for being at Cape Canaveral were so suspect. Why was *he* there, what failure was *he* trying to expiate? And why choose Cocoa Beach as his penitential shore? For three years he had asked himself these questions so often that they had ceased to have any meaning, like a fossilized catechism or the blunted self-recrimination of a paranoiac.

He had resigned his job as the chief architect of a big space development company after the large government contract on which the firm depended, for the design of the first Martian city-settlement, was awarded to a rival consortium. Secretly, however, he realized that his resignation had marked his unconscious acceptance that despite his great imaginative gifts he was unequal to the specialized and more prosaic tasks of designing the settlement. On the drawing board, as elsewhere, he would always remain earth-bound.

His dreams of building a new Gothic architecture of launching ports and control gantries, of being the Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier of the first city to be raised outside Earth, faded for ever, but leaving him unable to accept the alternative of turning out endless plans for low-cost hospitals in Ecuador and housing estates in Tokyo. For a year he had drifted aimlessly, but a few colour photographs of the vermilion sunsets at Cocoa Beach and a news story about the recluses living on in the submerged motels had provided a powerful compass.

He dropped the memo-tape into a drawer, making an effort to accept Louise Woodward and Travis on their own terms, a wife keeping watch over her dead husband and an old astronaut maintaining a solitary vigil over the memories of his lost comrades-in-arms.

The wind gusted against the balcony window, and a light spray of sand rained across the floor. At night dust-storms churned along the beach. Thermal pools isolated by the cooling desert would suddenly accrete like beads of quicksilver and erupt across the fluffy sand in miniature tornadoes.

Only fifty yards away, the dying cough of a heavy diesel cut through the shadows. Quickly Bridgman turned off the small desk light, grateful for his meanness over the battery packs plugged into the circuit, then stepped to the window.

At the leftward edge of the sand-break, half hidden in the long shadows cast by the hotel, was a large tracked vehicle with a low camouflaged hull. A narrow observation bridge had been built over the bumpers directly in front of the squat snout of the engine housing, and two of the beach wardens were craning up through the plexiglass windows at the balconies of the hotel, shifting their binoculars from room to room. Behind them, under the glass dome of the extended driving cabin, were three more wardens, controlling an outboard spotlight. In the centre of the bowl a thin mote of light pulsed with the rhythm of the engine, ready to throw its powerful beam into any of the open rooms.

Bridgman hid back behind the shutters as the binoculars focused upon the adjacent balcony, moved to his own, hesitated, and passed to the next. Exasperated by the sabotaging of the roadways, the wardens had evidently decided on a new type of vehicle. With their four broad tracks, the huge squat sand-cars would be free of the mesh roadways and able to rove at will through the dunes and sand-hills.

Bridgman watched the vehicle reverse slowly, its engine barely varying its deep bass growl, then move off along the line of hotels, almost indistinguishable in profile among the shifting dunes and hillocks. A hundred yards away, at the first intersection, it turned towards the main boulevard, wisps of dust streaming from the metal cleats like thin spumes of steam. The men in the observation bridge were still watching the hotel. Bridgman was certain that they had seen a reflected glimmer of light, or perhaps some movement of Louise Woodward's on the roof. However reluctant to leave the car and be contaminated by the poisonous dust, the wardens would not hesitate if the capture of one of the beachcombers warranted it.

Racing up the staircase, Bridgman made his way to the roof, crouching below the windows that overlooked the boulevard. Like a huge crab, the sand-car had parked under the jutting overhang of the big department store opposite. Once fifty feet from the ground, the concrete lip was now separated from it by little more than six or seven feet, and the sand-car was hidden in the shadows below it, engine silent. A single movement in a window, or the unexpected return of Travis, and the wardens would spring from the hatchways, their long-handled nets and lassos pinioning them around the necks and ankles. Bridgman remembered one beachcomber he had seen flushed from his motel hideout and carried off like a huge

twitching spider at the centre of a black rubber web, the wardens with their averted faces and masked mouths like devils in an abstract ballet.

Reaching the roof, Bridgman stepped out into the opaque white moonlight. Louise Woodward was leaning on the balcony, looking out towards the distant, unseen sea. At the faint sound of the door creaking she turned and began to walk listlessly around the roof, her pale face floating like a nimbus. She wore a freshly ironed print dress she had found in a rusty spin drier in one of the launderettes, and her streaked blonde hair floated out lightly behind her on the wind.

'Louise!'

Involuntarily she started, tripping over a fragment of the neon sign, then moved backwards towards the balcony overlooking the boulevard.

'Mrs Woodward!' Bridgman held her by the elbow, raised a hand to her mouth before she could cry out. 'The wardens are down below. They're watching the hotel. We must find Travis before he returns.'

Louise hesitated, apparently recognizing Bridgman only by an effort, and her eyes turned up to the black marble sky. Bridgman looked at his watch; it was almost 12.25. He searched the stars in the south-west.

Louise murmured: 'They're nearly here now, I must see them. Where is Travis, he should be here?'

Bridgman pulled at her arm. 'Perhaps he saw the sand-car. Mrs Woodward, we should leave.'

Suddenly she pointed up at the sky, then wrenched away from him and ran to the rail. 'There they are!'

Fretting, Bridgman waited until she had filled her eyes with the two companion points of light speeding from the western horizon. These were Merril and Pokrovski – like every schoolboy he knew the sequences perfectly, a second system of constellations with a more complex but far more tangible periodicity and precession – the Castor and Pollux of the orbiting zodiac, whose appearance always heralded a full conjunction the following night.

Louise Woodward gazed up at them from the rail, the rising wind lifting her hair off her shoulders and entraining it horizontally behind her head. Around her feet the red Martian dust swirled and rustled, silting over the fragments of the old neon sign, a brilliant pink spume streaming from her long fingers as they moved along the balcony ledge. When the satellites finally disappeared among the stars along the horizon, she leaned forwards, her face raised to the milk-blue moon as if to delay their departure, then turned back to Bridgman, a bright smile on her face.

His earlier suspicions vanishing, Bridgman smiled back at her encouragingly. 'Roger will be here tomorrow night, Louise. We must be careful the wardens don't catch us before we see him.'

He felt a sudden admiration for her, at the stoical way she had sustained herself during her long vigil. Perhaps she thought of Woodward as still alive, and in some way was patiently waiting for him to return? He remembered her saying once: 'Roger was only a boy when he took

off, you know, I feel more like his mother now,' as if frightened how Woodward would react to her dry skin and fading hair, fearing that he might even have forgotten her. No doubt the death she visualized for him was of a different order from the mortal kind.

Hand in hand, they tiptoed carefully down the flaking steps, jumped down from a terrace window into the soft sand below the wind-break. Bridgman sank to his knees in the fine silver moon-dust, then waded up to the firmer ground, pulling Louise after him. They climbed through a breach in the tilting palisades, then ran away from the line of dead hotels looming like skulls in the empty light.

'Paul, wait!' Her head still raised to the sky, Louise Woodward fell to her knees in a hollow between two dunes, with a laugh stumbled after Bridgman as he raced through the dips and saddles. The wind was now whipping the sand off the higher crests, flurries of dust spurting like excited wavelets. A hundred yards away, the town was a fading film set, projected by the camera obscura of the sinking moon. They were standing where the long Atlantic seas had once been ten fathoms deep, and Bridgman could scent again the tang of brine among the flickering white-caps of dust, phosphorescing like shoals of animalcula. He waited for any sign of Travis.

'Louise, we'll have to go back to the town. The sand-storms are blowing up, we'll never see Travis here.'

They moved back through the dunes, then worked their way among the narrow alleyways between the hotels to the northern gateway to the town. Bridgman found a vantage point in a small apartment block, and they lay down looking out below a window lintel into the sloping street, the warm sand forming a pleasant cushion. At the intersections the dust blew across the roadway in white clouds, obscuring the warden's beach-car parked a hundred yards down the boulevard.

Half an hour later an engine surged, and Bridgman began to pile sand into the interval in front of them. 'They're going. Thank God!'

Louise Woodward held his arm. 'Look!'

Fifty feet away, his white vinyl suit half hidden in the dust clouds, one of the wardens was advancing slowly towards them, his lasso twirling lightly in his hand. A few feet behind was a second warden, craning up at the windows of the apartment block with his binoculars.

Bridgman and Louise crawled back below the ceiling, then dug their way under a transom into the kitchen at the rear. A window opened on to a sand-filled yard, and they darted away through the lifting dust that whirled between the buildings.

Suddenly, around a corner, they saw the line of wardens moving down a side-street, the sand-car edging along behind them. Before Bridgman could steady himself a spasm of pain seized his right calf, contorting the gastrocnemius muscle, and he fell to one knee. Louise Woodward pulled him back against the wall, then pointed at a squat, bow-legged figure trudging towards them along the curving road into town.

'Travis –'

The tool-bag swung from his right hand, and his feet rang faintly on the wire-mesh roadway. Head down, he seemed unaware of the wardens hidden by a bend in the road.

'Come on!' Disregarding the negligible margin of safety, Bridgman clambered to his feet and impetuously ran out into the centre of the street. Louise tried to stop him, and they had covered only ten yards before the wardens saw them. There was a warning shout, and the spotlight flung its giant cone down the street. The sand-car surged forward, like a massive dust-covered bull, its tracks clawing at the sand.

'Travis!' As Bridgman reached the bend, Louise Woodward ten yards behind, Travis looked up from his reverie, then flung the tool-bag over one shoulder and raced ahead of them towards the clutter of motel roofs protruding from the other side of the street. Lagging behind the others, Bridgman again felt the cramp attack his leg, broke off into a painful shuffle. When Travis came back for him Bridgman tried to wave him away, but Travis pinioned his elbow and propelled him forward like an attendant straight-arming a patient.

The dust swirling around them, they disappeared through the fading streets and out into the desert, the shouts of the beach-wardens lost in the roar and clamour of the baying engine. Around them, like the strange metallic flora of some extraterrestrial garden, the old neon signs jutted from the red Martian sand – 'Satellite Motel', 'Planet Bar', 'Mercury Motel'. Hiding behind them, they reached the scrub-covered dunes on the edge of the town, then picked up one of the trails that led away among the sand-reefs. There, in the deep grottoes of compacted sand which hung like inverted palaces, they waited until the storm subsided. Shortly before dawn the wardens abandoned their search, unable to bring the heavy sand-car on to the disintegrating reef.

Contemptuous of the wardens, Travis lit a small fire with his cigarette lighter, burning splinters of driftwood that had gathered in the gullies. Bridgman crouched beside it, warming his hands.

'This is the first time they've been prepared to leave the sand-car,' he remarked to Travis. 'It means they're under orders to catch us.'

Travis shrugged. 'Maybe. They're extending the fence along the beach. They probably intend to seal us in for ever.'

'What?' Bridgman stood up with a sudden feeling of uneasiness. 'Why should they? Are you sure? I mean, what would be the point?'

Travis looked up at him, a flicker of dry amusement on his bleached face. Wisps of smoke wreathed his head, curled up past the serpentine columns of the grotto to the winding interval of sky a hundred feet above. 'Bridgman, forgive me saying so, but if you want to leave here, you should leave now. In a month's time you won't be able to.'

Bridgman ignored this, and searched the cleft of dark sky overhead, which framed the constellation Scorpio, as if hoping to see a reflection of the distant sea. 'They must be crazy. How much of this fence did you see?'

'About eight hundred yards. It won't take them long to complete. The sections are prefabricated, about forty feet high.' He smiled ironically at Bridgman's discomfort. 'Relax, Bridgman. If you do want to get out, you'll always be able to tunnel underneath it.'

'I don't want to get out,' Bridgman said coldly. 'Damn them, Travis, they're turning the place into a zoo. You know it won't be the same with a fence all the way around it.'

'A corner of Earth that is forever Mars.' Under the high forehead, Travis's eyes were sharp and watchful. 'I see their point. There hasn't been a fatal casualty now' – he glanced at Louise Woodward, who was strolling about in the colonnades – 'for nearly twenty years, and passenger rockets are supposed to be as safe as commuters' trains. They're quietly sealing off the past, Louise and I and you with it. I suppose it's pretty considerate of them not to burn the place down with flame-throwers. The virus would be a sufficient excuse. After all, we three are probably the only reservoirs left on the planet.' He picked up a handful of red dust and examined the fine crystals with a sombre eye. 'Well, Bridgman, what are you going to do?'

His thoughts discharging themselves through his mind like frantic signal flares, Bridgman walked away without answering.

Behind them, Louise Woodward wandered among the deep galleries of the grotto, crooning to herself in a low voice to the sighing rhythms of the whirling sand.

The next morning they returned to the town, wading through the deep drifts of sand that lay like a fresh fall of red snow between the hotels and stores, coruscating in the brilliant sunlight. Travis and Louise Woodward made their way towards their quarters in the motels further down the beach. Bridgman searched the still, crystal air for any signs of the wardens, but the sand-car had gone, its tracks obliterated by the storm.

In his room he found their calling-card.

A huge tide of dust had flowed through the french windows and submerged the desk and bed, three feet deep against the rear wall. Outside the sand-break had been inundated, and the contours of the desert had completely altered, a few spires of obsidian marking its former perspectives like buoys on a shifting sea. Bridgman spent the morning digging out his books and equipment, dismantled the electrical system and its batteries and carried everything to the room above. He would have moved to the penthouse on the top floor, but his lights would have been visible for miles.

Settling into his new quarters, he switched on the tape-recorder, heard a short, clipped message in the brisk voice which had shouted orders at the wardens the previous evening. 'Bridgman, this is Major Webster, deputy commandant of Cocoa Beach Reservation. On the instructions of the Anti-Viral Sub-committee of the UN General Assembly we are now building a continuous fence around the beach area. On completion no

further egress will be allowed, and anyone escaping will be immediately returned to the reservation. Give yourself up now, Bridgman, before –'

Bridgman stopped the tape, then reversed the spool and erased the message, staring angrily at the instrument. Unable to settle down to the task of rewiring the room's circuits, he paced about, fiddling with the architectural drawings propped against the wall. He felt restless and hyper-excited, perhaps because he had been trying to repress, not very successfully, precisely those doubts of which Webster had now reminded him.

He stepped on to the balcony and looked out over the desert, at the red dunes rolling to the windows directly below. For the fourth time he had moved up a floor, and the sequence of identical rooms he had occupied were like displaced images of himself seen through a prism. Their common focus, that elusive final definition of himself which he had sought for so long, still remained to be found. Timelessly the sand swept towards him, its shifting contours, approximating more closely than any other landscape he had found to complete psychic zero, enveloping his past failures and uncertainties, masking them in its enigmatic canopy.

Bridgman watched the red sand flicker and fluoresce in the steepening sunlight. He would never see Mars now, and redress the implicit failure of talent, but a workable replica of the planet was contained within the beach area.

Several million tons of the Martian top-soil had been ferried in as ballast some fifty years earlier, when it was feared that the continuous firing of planetary probes and space vehicles, and the transportation of bulk stores and equipment to Mars would fractionally lower the gravitational mass of the Earth and bring it into tighter orbit around the Sun. Although the distance involved would be little more than a few millimetres, and barely raise the temperature of the atmosphere, its cumulative effects over an extended period might have resulted in a loss into space of the tenuous layers of the outer atmosphere, and of the radiological veil which alone made the biosphere habitable.

Over a twenty-year period a fleet of large freighters had shuttled to and from Mars, dumping the ballast into the sea near the landing grounds of Cape Canaveral. Simultaneously the Russians were filling in a small section of the Caspian Sea. The intention had been that the ballast should be swallowed by the Atlantic and Caspian waters, but all too soon it was found that the microbiological analysis of the sand had been inadequate.

At the Martian polar caps, where the original water vapour in the atmosphere had condensed, a residue of ancient organic matter formed the top-soil, a fine sandy loess containing the fossilized spores of the giant lichens and mosses which had been the last living organisms on the planet millions of years earlier. Embedded in these spores were the crystal lattices of the viruses which had once preyed on the plants, and traces of these were carried back to Earth with the Canaveral and Caspian ballast.

A few years afterwards a drastic increase in a wide range of plant diseases was noticed in the southern states of America and in the Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan republics of the Soviet Union. All over Florida there were outbreaks of blight and mosaic disease, orange plantations withered and died, stunted palms split by the roadside like dried banana skins, saw grass stiffened into paper spears in the summer heat. Within a few years the entire peninsula was transformed into a desert. The swampy jungles of the Everglades became bleached and dry, the rivers cracked husks strewn with the gleaming skeletons of crocodiles and birds, the forests petrified.

The former launching-ground at Canaveral was closed, and shortly afterwards the Cocoa Beach resorts were sealed off and evacuated, billions of dollars of real estate were abandoned to the virus. Fortunately never virulent to animal hosts, its influence was confined to within a small radius of the original loess which had borne it, unless ingested by the human organism, when it symbioted with the bacteria in the gut flora, benign and unknown to the host, but devastating to vegetation thousands of miles from Canaveral if returned to the soil.

Unable to rest despite his sleepless night, Bridgman played irritably with the tape-recorder. During their close escape from the wardens he had more than half hoped they would catch him. The mysterious leg cramp was obviously psychogenic. Although unable to accept consciously the logic of Webster's argument, he would willingly have conceded to the *fait accompli* of physical capture, gratefully submitted to a year's quarantine at the Parasitological Cleansing Unit at Tampa, and then returned to his career as an architect, chastened but accepting his failure.

As yet, however, the opportunity for surrender had failed to offer itself. Travis appeared to be aware of his ambivalent motives; Bridgman noticed that he and Louise Woodward had made no arrangements to meet him that evening for the conjunction.

In the early afternoon he went down into the streets, ploughed through the drifts of red sand, following the footprints of Travis and Louise as they wound in and out of the side-streets, finally saw them disappear into the coarser, flint-like dunes among the submerged motels to the south of the town. Giving up, he returned through the empty, shadowless streets, now and then shouted up into the hot air, listening to the echoes boom away among the dunes.

Later that afternoon he walked out towards the north-east, picking his way carefully through the dips and hollows, crouching in the pools of shadow whenever the distant sounds of the construction gangs along the perimeter were carried across to him by the wind. Around him, in the great dust basins, the grains of red sand glittered like diamonds. Barbs of rusting metal protruded from the slopes, remnants of Mars satellites and launching stages which had fallen on to the Martian deserts and then been carried back again to Earth. One fragment which he passed, a complete section of hull plate like a concave shield, still carried part of

an identification numeral, and stood upright in the dissolving sand like a door into nowhere.

Just before dusk he reached a tall spur of obsidian that reared up into the tinted cerise sky like the spire of a ruined church, climbed up among its jutting cornices and looked out across the intervening two or three miles of dunes to the perimeter. Illuminated by the last light, the metal grilles shone with a roseate glow like fairy portcullises on the edge of an enchanted sea. At least half a mile of the fence had been completed, and as he watched another of the giant prefabricated sections was cantilevered into the air and staked to the ground. Already the eastern horizon was cut off by the encroaching fence, the enclosed Martian sand like the gravel scattered at the bottom of a cage.

Perched on the spur, Bridgman felt a warning tremor of pain in his calf. He leapt down in a flurry of dust, without looking back made off among the dunes and reefs.

Later, as the last baroque whorls of the sunset faded below the horizon, he waited on the roof for Travis and Louise Woodward, peering impatiently into the empty moon-filled streets.

Shortly after midnight, at an elevation of 35 degrees in the south-west, between Aquila and Ophiuchus, the conjunction began. Bridgman continued to search the streets, and ignored the seven points of speeding light as they raced towards him from the horizon like an invasion from deep space. There was no indication of their convergent orbital pathways, which would soon scatter them thousands of miles apart, and the satellites moved as if they were always together, in the tight configuration Bridgman had known since childhood, like a lost zodiacal emblem, a constellation detached from the celestial sphere and forever frantically searching to return to its place.

'Travis! Confound you!' With a snarl, Bridgman swung away from the balcony and moved along to the exposed section of rail behind the elevator head. To be avoided like a pariah by Travis and Louise Woodward forced him to accept that he was no longer a true resident of the beach and now existed in a no-man's-land between them and the wardens.

The seven satellites drew nearer, and Bridgman glanced up at them cursorily. They were disposed in a distinctive but unusual pattern resembling the Greek letter *x*, a limp cross, a straight lateral member containing four capsules more or less in line ahead – Connolly, Tkachev, Merril and Maiakovski – bisected by three others forming with Tkachev an elongated Z – Pokrovski, Woodward and Brodisnek. The pattern had been variously identified as a hammer and sickle, an eagle, a swastika, and a dove, as well as a variety of religious and runic emblems, but all these were being defeated by the advancing tendency of the older capsules to vaporize.

It was this slow disintegration of the aluminium shells that made them visible – it had often been pointed out that the observer on the ground was looking, not at the actual capsule, but at a local field of vaporized aluminium and ionized hydrogen peroxide gas from the

ruptured attitude jets now distributed within half a mile of each of the capsules. Woodward's, the most recently in orbit, was a barely perceptible point of light. The hulks of the capsules, with their perfectly preserved human cargoes, were continually dissolving, and a wide fan of silver spray opened out in a phantom wake behind Merril and Pokrovski (1998 and 1999), like a double star transforming itself into a nova in the centre of a constellation. As the mass of the capsules diminished they sank into a closer orbit around the earth, would soon touch the denser layers of the atmosphere and plummet to the ground.

Bridgman watched the satellites as they moved towards him, his irritation with Travis forgotten. As always, he felt himself moved by the eerie but strangely serene spectacle of the ghostly convoy endlessly circling the dark sea of the midnight sky, the long-dead astronauts converging for the ten-thousandth time upon their brief rendezvous and then setting off upon their lonely flight-paths around the perimeter of the ionosphere, the tidal edge of the beachway into space which had reclaimed them.

How Louise Woodward could bear to look up at her husband he had never been able to understand. After her arrival he once invited her to the hotel, remarking that there was an excellent view of the beautiful sunsets, and she had snapped back bitterly: 'Beautiful? Can you imagine what it's like looking up at a sunset when your husband's spinning through it in his coffin?'

This reaction had been a common one when the first astronauts had died after failing to make contact with the launching platforms in fixed orbit. When these new stars rose in the west an attempt had been made to shoot them down – there was the unsettling prospect of the skies a thousand years hence, littered with orbiting refuse – but later they were left in this natural graveyard, forming their own monument.

Obscured by the clouds of dust carried up into the air by the sand-storm, the satellites shone with little more than the intensity of second-magnitude stars, winking as the reflected light was interrupted by the lanes of strato-cirrus. The wake of diffusing light behind Merril and Pokrovski which usually screened the other capsules seemed to have diminished in size, and he could see both Maiakovski and Brodisnek clearly for the first time in several months. Wondering whether Merril or Pokrovski would be the first to fall from orbit, he looked towards the centre of the cross as it passed overhead.

With a sharp intake of breath, he tilted his head back. In surprise he noticed that one of the familiar points of light was missing from the centre of the group. What he had assumed to be an occlusion of the conjoint vapour trails by dust clouds was simply due to the fact that one of the capsules – Merril's, he decided, the third of the line ahead – had fallen from its orbit.

Head raised, he sidestepped slowly across the roof, avoiding the pieces of rusting neon sign, following the convoy as it passed overhead and moved towards the eastern horizon. No longer overlaid by the wake of

Merril's capsule, Woodward's shone with far greater clarity, and almost appeared to have taken the former's place, although he was not due to fall from orbit for at least a century.

In the distance somewhere an engine growled. A moment later, from a different quarter, a woman's voice cried out faintly. Bridgman moved to the rail, over the intervening roof-tops saw two figures silhouetted against the sky on the elevator head of an apartment block, then heard Louise Woodward call out again. She was pointing up at the sky with both hands, her long hair blown about her face, Travis trying to restrain her. Bridgman realized that she had misconstrued Merril's descent, assuming that the fallen astronaut was her husband. He climbed on to the edge of the balcony, watching the pathetic tableau on the distant roof.

Again, somewhere among the dunes, an engine moaned. Before Bridgman could turn around, a brilliant blade of light cleft the sky in the south-west. Like a speeding comet, an immense train of vaporizing particles stretching behind it to the horizon, it soared towards them, the downward curve of its pathway clearly visible. Detached from the rest of the capsules, which were now disappearing among the stars along the eastern horizon, it was little more than a few miles off the ground.

Bridgman watched it approach, apparently on a collision course with the hotel. The expanding corona of white light, like a gigantic signal flare, illuminated the roof-tops, etching the letters of the neon signs over the submerged motels on the outskirts of the town. He ran for the doorway, as he raced down the stairs saw the glow of the descending capsule fill the sombre streets like a hundred moons. When he reached his room, sheltered by the massive weight of the hotel, he watched the dunes in front of the hotel light up like a stage set. Three hundred yards away the low camouflaged hull of the wardens' beach-car was revealed poised on a crest, its feeble spotlight drowned by the glare.

With a deep metallic sigh, the burning catafalque of the dead astronaut soared overhead, a cascade of vaporizing metal pouring from its hull, filling the sky with incandescent light. Reflected below it, like an expressway illuminated by an aircraft's spotlights, a long lane of light several hundred yards in width raced out into the desert towards the sea. As Bridgman shielded his eyes, it suddenly erupted in a tremendous explosion of detonating sand. A huge curtain of white dust lifted into the air and fell slowly to the ground. The sounds of the impact rolled against the hotel, mounting in a sustained crescendo that drummed against the windows. A series of smaller explosions flared up like opalescent fountains. All over the desert fires flickered briefly where fragments of the capsule had been scattered. Then the noise subsided, and an immense glistening pall of phosphorescing gas hung in the air like a silver veil, particles within it beading and winking.

Two hundred yards away across the sand was the running figure of Louise Woodward, Travis twenty paces behind her. Bridgman watched them dart in and out of the dunes, then abruptly felt the cold spotlight

of the beach-car hit his face and flood the room behind him. The vehicle was moving straight towards him, two of the wardens, nets and lassos in hand, riding the outboard.

Quickly Bridgman straddled the balcony, jumped down into the sand and raced towards the crest of the first dune. He crouched and ran on through the darkness as the beam probed the air. Above, the glistening pall was slowly fading, the particles of vaporized metal sifting towards the dark Martian sand. In the distance the last echoes of the impact were still reverberating among the hotels of the beach colonies farther down the coast.

Five minutes later he caught up with Louise Woodward and Travis. The capsule's impact had flattened a number of the dunes, forming a shallow basin some quarter of a mile in diameter, and the surrounding slopes were scattered with the still glowing particles, sparkling like fading eyes. The beach-car growled somewhere four or five hundred yards behind him, and Bridgman broke off into an exhausted walk. He stopped beside Travis, who was kneeling on the ground, breath pumping into his lungs. Fifty yards away Louise Woodward was running up and down, distraughtly gazing at the fragments of smouldering metal. For a moment the spotlight of the approaching beach-car illuminated her, and she ran away among the dunes. Bridgman caught a glimpse of the inconsolable anguish in her face.

Travis was still on his knees. He had picked up a piece of the oxidized metal and was pressing it together in his hands.

'Travis, for God's sake tell her! This was Merril's capsule, there's no doubt about it! Woodward's still up there.'

Travis looked up at him silently, his eyes searching Bridgman's face. A spasm of pain tore his mouth, and Bridgman realized that the barb of steel he clasped reverently in his hands was still glowing with heat.

'Travis!' He tried to pull the man's hands apart, the pungent stench of burning flesh gusting into his face, but Travis wrenched away from him. 'Leave her alone, Bridgman! Go back with the wardens!'

Bridgman retreated from the approaching beach-car. Only thirty yards away, its spotlight filled the basin. Louise Woodward was still searching the dunes. Travis held his ground as the wardens jumped down from the car and advanced towards him with their nets, his bloodied hands raised at his sides, the steel barb flashing like a dagger. At the head of the wardens, the only one unmasked was a trim, neat-featured man with an intent, serious face. Bridgman guessed that this was Major Webster, and that the wardens had known of the impending impact and hoped to capture them, and Louise in particular, before it occurred.

Bridgman stumbled back towards the dunes at the edge of the basin. As he neared the crest he trapped his foot in a semicircular plate of metal, sat down and freed his heel. Unmistakably it was part of a control panel, the circular instrument housings still intact.

Overhead the pall of glistening vapour had moved off to the north-east,

and the reflected light was directly over the rusting gantries of the former launching site at Cape Canaveral. For a few fleeting seconds the gantries seemed to be enveloped in a sheen of silver, transfigured by the vaporized body of the dead astronaut, diffusing over them in a farewell gesture, his final return to the site from which he had set off to his death a century earlier. Then the gantries sank again into their craggy shadows, and the pall moved off like an immense wraith towards the sea, barely distinguishable from the star glow.

Down below Travis was sitting on the ground surrounded by the wardens. He scuttled about on his hands like a frantic crab, scooping handfuls of the virus-laden sand at them. Holding tight to their masks, the wardens manoeuvred around him, their nets and lassos at the ready. Another group moved slowly towards Bridgman.

Bridgman picked up a handful of the dark Martian sand beside the instrument panel, felt the soft glowing crystals warm his palm. In his mind he could still see the silver-sheathed gantries of the launching site across the bay, by a curious illusion almost identical with the Martian city he had designed years earlier. He watched the pall disappear over the sea, then looked around at the other remnants of Merril's capsule scattered over the slopes. High in the western night, between Pegasus and Cygnus, shone the distant disc of the planet Mars, which for both himself and the dead astronaut had served for so long as a symbol of unattained ambition. The wind stirred softly through the sand, cooling this replica of the planet which lay passively around him, and at last he understood why he had come to the beach and been unable to leave it.

Twenty yards away Travis was being dragged off like a wild dog, his thrashing body pinioned in the centre of a web of lassos. Louise Woodward had run away among the dunes towards the sea, following the vanished gas cloud.

In a sudden access of refound confidence, Bridgman drove his fist into the dark sand, buried his forearm like a foundation pillar. A flange of hot metal from Merril's capsule burned his wrist, bonding him to the spirit of the dead astronaut. Scattered around him on the Martian sand, in a sense Merril had reached Mars after all.

'Damn it!' he cried exultantly to himself as the wardens' lassos stung his neck and shoulders. 'We made it!'

1962

THE WATCH-TOWERS

The next day, for some reason, there was a sudden increase of activity in the watch-towers. This began during the latter half of the morning, and by noon, when Renthall left the hotel on his way to see Mrs Osmond, seemed to have reached its peak. People were standing at their windows and balconies along both sides of the street, whispering agitatedly to each other behind the curtains and pointing up into the sky.

Renthall usually tried to ignore the watch-towers, resenting even the smallest concession to the fact of their existence, but at the bottom of the street, where he was hidden in the shadow thrown by one of the houses, he stopped and craned his head up at the nearest tower.

A hundred feet away from him, it hung over the Public Library, its tip poised no more than twenty feet above the roof. The glass-enclosed cabin in the lowest tier appeared to be full of observers, opening and shutting the windows and shifting about what Renthall assumed were huge pieces of optical equipment. He looked around at the further towers, suspended from the sky at three hundred foot intervals in every direction, noticing an occasional flash of light as a window turned and caught the sun.

An elderly man wearing a shabby black suit and wing collar, who usually loitered outside the library, came across the street to Renthall and backed into the shadows beside him.

'They're up to something all right.' He cupped his hands over his eyes and peered up anxiously at the watch-towers. 'I've never seen them like this as long as I can remember.'

Renthall studied his face. However alarmed, he was obviously relieved by the signs of activity. 'I shouldn't worry unduly,' Renthall told him. 'It's a change to see something going on at all.'

Before the other could reply he turned on his heel and strode away along the pavement. It took him ten minutes to reach the street in which Mrs Osmond lived, and he fixed his eyes firmly on the ground, ignoring the few passers-by. Although dominated by the watch-towers – four of them hung in a line exactly down its centre – the street was almost deserted. Half the houses were untenanted and falling into what would soon be an irreversible state of disrepair. Usually Renthall assessed each property carefully, trying to decide whether to leave his hotel and take one of them, but the movement in the watch-towers had caused him more anxiety than he was prepared to admit, and the terrace of houses passed unnoticed.

Mrs Osmond's house stood halfway down the street, its gate swinging loosely on its rusty hinges. Renthall hesitated under the plane tree growing by the edge of the pavement, and then crossed the narrow garden and quickly let himself through the door.

Mrs Osmond invariably spent the afternoon sitting out on the veranda in the sun, gazing at the weeds in the back garden, but today she had retreated to a corner of the sitting room. She was sorting a suitcase full of old papers when Renthall came in.

Renthall made no attempt to embrace her and wandered over to the window. Mrs Osmond had half drawn the curtains and he pulled them back. There was a watch-tower ninety feet away, almost directly ahead, hanging over the parallel terrace of empty houses. The lines of towers receded diagonally from left to right towards the horizon, partly obscured by the bright haze.

'Do you think you should have come today?' Mrs Osmond asked, shifting her plump hips nervously in the chair.

'Why not?' Renthall said, scanning the towers, hands loosely in his pockets.

'But if they're going to keep a closer watch on us now they'll notice you coming here.'

'I shouldn't believe all the rumours you hear,' Renthall told her calmly.

'What do you think it means then?'

'I've absolutely no idea. Their movements may be as random and meaningless as our own.' Renthall shrugged. 'Perhaps they *are* going to keep a closer watch on us. What does it matter if all they do is stare?'

'Then you mustn't come here any more!' Mrs Osmond protested.

'Why? I hardly believe they can see through walls.'

'They're not that stupid,' Mrs Osmond said irritably. 'They'll soon put two and two together, if they haven't already.'

Renthall took his eyes off the tower and looked down at Mrs Osmond patiently. 'My dear, this house isn't tapped. For all they know we may be darning our prayer rugs or discussing the endocrine system of the tapeworm.'

'Not you, Charles,' Mrs Osmond said with a short laugh. 'Not if they know you.' Evidently pleased by this sally, she relaxed and took a cigarette out of the box on the table.

'Perhaps they don't know me,' Renthall said dryly. 'In fact, I'm quite sure they don't. If they did I can't believe I should still be here.'

He noticed himself stooping, a reliable sign that he was worrying, and went over to the sofa.

'Is the school going to start tomorrow?' Mrs Osmond asked when he had disposed his long, thin legs around the table.

'It should do,' Renthall said. 'Hanson went down to the Town Hall this morning, but as usual they had little idea of what was going on.'

He opened his jacket and pulled out of the inner pocket an old but neatly folded copy of a woman's magazine.

'Charles!' Mrs Osmond exclaimed. 'Where did you get this?'

She took it from Renthall and started leafing through the soiled pages.

'One of my sources,' Renthall said. From the sofa he could still see the watch-tower over the houses opposite. 'Georgina Simons. She has a library of them.'

He rose, went over to the window and drew the curtains across.

'Charles, don't. I can't see.'

'Read it later,' Renthall told her. He lay back on the sofa again. 'Are you coming to the recital this afternoon?'

'Hasn't it been cancelled?' Mrs Osmond asked, putting the magazine down reluctantly.

'No, of course not.'

'Charles, I don't think I want to go.' Mrs Osmond frowned. 'What records is Hanson going to play?'

'Some Tchaikovsky. And Grieg.' He tried to make it sound interesting. 'You must come. We can't just sit about subsiding into this state of boredom and uselessness.'

'I know,' Mrs Osmond said fractiously. 'But I don't feel like it. Not today. All those records bore me. I've heard them so often.'

'They bore me too. But at least it's something to do.' He put an arm around Mrs Osmond's shoulders and began to play with the darker unbleached hair behind her ears, tapping the large nickel ear-rings she wore and listening to them tinkle.

When he put his hand on to her knee Mrs Osmond stood up and prowled aimlessly around the room, straightening her skirt.

'Julia, what is the matter with you?' Renthall asked irritably. 'Have you got a headache?'

Mrs Osmond was by the window, gazing up at the watch-towers. 'Do you think they're going to come down?'

'Of course not!' Renthall snapped. 'Where on earth did you get that idea?'

Suddenly he felt unbearably exasperated. The confined dimensions of the dusty sitting-room seemed to suffocate reason. He stood up and buttoned his jacket. 'I'll see you this afternoon at the Institute, Julia. The recital starts at three.'

Mrs Osmond nodded vaguely, unfastened the french windows and ambled forwards across the veranda into full view of the watch-towers, the glassy expression on her face like a supplicant nun's.

As Renthall had expected, the school did not open the next day. When they tired of hanging around the hotel after breakfast he and Hanson went down to the Town Hall. The building was almost empty and the only official they were able to find was unhelpful.

'We have no instructions at present,' he told them, 'but as soon as the term starts you will be notified. Though from what I hear the postponement is to be indefinite.'

'Is that the committee's decision?' Renthall asked. 'Or just another of the town clerk's brilliant extemporizings?'

'The school committee is no longer meeting,' the official said. 'I'm afraid the town clerk isn't here today.' Before Renthall could speak he added: 'You will, of course, continue to draw your salaries. Perhaps you would care to call in at the treasurer's department on your way out?'

Renthall and Hanson left and looked about for a café. Finally they found one that was open and sat under the awning, staring vacantly at the watch-towers hanging over the roof-tops around them. Their activity had lessened considerably since the previous day. The nearest tower was only fifty feet away, immediately above a disused office building on the other side of the street. The windows in the observation tier remained shut, but every few minutes Renthall noticed a shadow moving behind the panes.

Eventually a waitress came out to them, and Renthall ordered coffee.

'I think I shall have to give a few lessons,' Hanson remarked. 'All this leisure is becoming too much of a good thing.'

'It's an idea,' Renthall agreed. 'If you can find anyone interested. I'm sorry the recital yesterday was such a flop.'

Hanson shrugged. 'I'll see if I can get hold of some new records. By the way, I thought Julia looked very handsome yesterday.'

Renthall acknowledged the compliment with a slight bow of his head. 'I'd like to take her out more often.'

'Do you think that's wise?'

'Why on earth not?'

'Well, just at present, you know.' Hanson inclined a finger at the watch-towers.

'I don't see that it matters particularly,' Renthall said. He disliked personal confidences and was about to change the subject when Hanson leaned forward across the table.

'Perhaps not, but I gather there was some mention of you at the last Council meeting. One or two members were rather critical of your little *ménage à deux*.' He smiled thinly at Renthall, who was frowning into his coffee. 'Sheer spite, no doubt, but your behaviour is a little idiosyncratic.'

Controlling himself, Renthall pushed away the coffee cup. 'Do you mind telling me what damned business it is of theirs?'

Hanson laughed. 'None, really, except that they are the executive authority, and I suppose we should take our cue from them.' Renthall snorted at this, and Hanson went on: 'As a matter of interest, you may receive an official directive over the next few days.'

'A *what*?' Renthall exploded. He sat back, shaking his head incredulously. 'Are you serious?' When Hanson nodded he began to laugh harshly.

'Those idiots! I don't know why we put up with them. Sometimes their stupidity positively staggers me.'

'Steady on,' Hanson demurred. 'I do see their point. Bearing in mind the big commotion in the watch-towers yesterday the Council probably feel we shouldn't do anything that might antagonize them. You never know, they may even be acting on official instructions.'

Renthall glanced contemptuously at Hanson. 'Do you *really* believe that nonsense about the Council being in touch with the watch-towers? It may give a few simpletons a sense of security, but for heaven's sake don't try it on me. My patience is just about exhausted.' He watched Hanson carefully, wondering which of the Council members had provided him with his information. The lack of subtlety depressed him painfully. 'However, thanks for warning me. I suppose it means there'll be an overpowering air of embarrassment when Julia and I go to the cinema tomorrow.'

Hanson shook his head. 'No. Actually the performance has been cancelled. In view of yesterday's disturbances.'

'But why –?' Renthall slumped back. 'Haven't they got the intelligence to realize that it's just at this sort of time that we need every social get-together we can organize? People are hiding away in their back bedrooms like a lot of frightened ghosts. We've got to bring them out, give them something that will pull them together.'

He gazed up thoughtfully at the watch-tower across the street. Shadows circulated behind the frosted panes of the observation windows. 'Some sort of gala, say, or a garden fête. Who could organize it, though?'

Hanson pushed back his chair. 'Careful, Charles. I don't know whether the Council would altogether approve.'

'I'm sure they wouldn't.' After Hanson had left he remained at the table and returned to his solitary contemplation of the watch-towers.

For half an hour Renthall sat at the table, playing absently with his empty coffee cup and watching the few people who passed along the street. No one else visited the café, and he was glad to be able to pursue his thoughts alone, in this miniature urban vacuum, with nothing to intervene between himself and the lines of watch-towers stretching into the haze beyond the roof-tops.

With the exception of Mrs Osmond, Renthall had virtually no close friends in whom to confide. With his sharp intelligence and impatience with trivialities, Renthall was one of those men with whom others find it difficult to relax. A certain innate condescension, a reserved but unmistakable attitude of superiority held them away from him, though few people regarded him as anything but a shabby pedagogue. At the hotel he kept to himself. There was little social contact between the guests; in the lounge and dining room they sat immersed in their old newspapers and magazines, occasionally murmuring quietly to each other. The only thing which could mobilize the simultaneous communion of the guests was some untoward activity in the watch-towers, and at such times Renthall always maintained an absolute silence.

Just before he stood up a square thick-set figure approached down the street. Renthall recognized the man and was about to turn his seat to avoid having to greet him, but something about his expression made him lean forward. Fleshy and dark-jowled, the man walked with an easy, rolling gait, his double-breasted check overcoat open to reveal a well-tended midriff. This was Victor Boardman, owner of the local flea-pit cinema, sometime bootlegger and procurer at large.

Renthall had never spoken to him, but he was aware that Boardman shared with him the distinction of bearing the stigma of the Council's disapproval. Hanson claimed that the Council had successfully stamped out Boardman's illicit activities, but the latter's permanent expression of smug contempt for the rest of the world seemed to belie this.

As he passed they exchanged glances, and Boardman's face broke momentarily into a knowing smirk. It was obviously directed at Renthall, and implied a pre-judgement of some event about which Renthall as yet knew nothing, presumably his coming collision with the Council. Obviously Boardman expected him to capitulate to the Council without a murmur.

Annoyed, Renthall turned his back on Boardman, then watched him over his shoulder as he padded off down the street, his easy relaxed shoulders swaying from side to side.

The following day the activity in the watch-towers had subsided entirely. The blue haze from which they extended was brighter than it had been for several months, and the air in the streets seemed to sparkle with the light reflected off the observation windows. There was no sign of movement among them, and the sky had a rigid, uniform appearance that indicated an indefinite lull.

For some reason, however, Renthall found himself more nervous than he had been for some time. The school had not yet opened, but he felt strangely reluctant to visit Mrs Osmond and remained indoors all morning, shunning the streets as if avoiding some invisible shadow of guilt.

The long lines of watch-towers stretching endlessly from one horizon to the other reminded him that he could soon expect to receive the Council's 'directive' – Hanson would not have mentioned it by accident – and it was always during the lulls that the Council was most active in consolidating its position, issuing a stream of petty regulations and amendments.

Renthall would have liked to challenge the Council's authority on some formal matter unconnected with himself – the validity, for example, of one of the byelaws prohibiting public assemblies in the street – but the prospect of all the intrigue involved in canvassing the necessary support bored him utterly. Although none of them individually would challenge the Council, most people would have been glad to see it toppled, but there seemed to be no likely focus for their opposition. Apart from the fear that the Council was in touch with the watch-towers, no one

would stand up for Renthall's right to carry on his affair with Mrs Osmond.

Curiously enough, she seemed unaware of these cross-currents when he went to see her that afternoon. She had cleaned the house and was in high humour, the windows wide open to the brilliant air.

'Charles, what's the matter with you?' she chided him when he slumped inertly into a chair. 'You look like a broody hen.'

'I felt rather tired this morning. It's probably the hot weather.' When she sat down on the arm of the chair he put one hand listlessly on her hip, trying to summon together his energies. 'Recently I've been developing an *idée fixe* about the Council, I must be going through a crisis of confidence. I need some method of reasserting myself.'

Mrs Osmond stroked his hair soothingly with her cool fingers, her eyes watching him silkily. 'What *you* need, Charles, is a little mother love. You're so isolated at that hotel, among all those old people. Why don't you rent one of the houses in this road? I'd be able to look after you then.'

Renthall glanced up at her sardonically. 'Perhaps I could move in here?' he asked, but she tossed her head back with a derisive snort and went over to the window.

She gazed up at the nearest watch-tower a hundred feet away, its windows closed and silent, the great shaft disappearing into the haze. 'What do you suppose they're thinking about?'

Renthall snapped his fingers off-handedly. 'They're probably not thinking about anything. Sometimes I wonder whether there's anyone there at all. The movements we see may be just optical illusions. Although the windows appear to open no one's ever actually *seen* any of them. For all we know this place may well be nothing more than an abandoned zoo.'

Mrs Osmond regarded him with rueful amusement. 'Charles, you do pick some extraordinary metaphors. I often doubt if you're like the rest of us, I wouldn't dare say the sort of things you do in case –' She broke off, glancing up involuntarily at the watch-towers hanging from the sky.

Idly, Renthall asked: 'In case what?'

'Well, in case –' Irritably, she said: 'Don't be absurd, Charles, doesn't the thought of those towers hanging down over us frighten you at all?'

Renthall turned his head slowly and stared up at the watch-towers. Once he had tried to count them, but there seemed little point. 'Yes, they frighten me,' he said noncommittally. 'In the same way that Hanson and the old people at the hotel and everyone else here does. But not in the sense that the boys at school are frightened of *me*.'

Mrs Osmond nodded, misinterpreting this last remark. 'Children are very perceptive, Charles. They probably know you're not interested in them. Unfortunately they're not old enough to understand what the watch-towers mean.'

She gave a slight shiver, and pulled her cardigan around her shoulders. 'You know, on the days when they're busy behind their windows I can

hardly move around, it's terrible. I feel so listless, all I want to do is sit and stare at the wall. Perhaps I'm more sensitive to their, er, radiations than most people.'

Renthall smiled. 'You must be. Don't let them depress you. Next time why don't you put on a paper hat and do a pirouette?'

'What? Oh, Charles, stop being cynical.'

'I'm not. Seriously, Julia, do you think it would make any difference?'

Mrs Osmond shook her head sadly. 'You try, Charles, and then tell me. Where are you going?'

Renthall paused at the window. 'Back to the hotel to rest. By the way, do you know Victor Boardman?'

'I used to, once. Why, what are you getting up to with him?'

'Does he own the garden next to the cinema car park?'

'I think so.' Mrs Osmond laughed. 'Are you going to take up gardening?'

'In a sense.' With a wave, Renthall left.

He began with Dr Clifton, whose room was directly below his own. Clifton's duties at his surgery occupied him for little more than an hour a day – there were virtually no deaths or illnesses – but he still retained sufficient initiative to cultivate a hobby. He had turned one end of his room into a small aviary, containing a dozen canaries, and spent much of his time trying to teach them tricks. His acerbic, matter-of-fact manner always tired Renthall, but he respected the doctor for not sliding into total lethargy like everyone else.

Clifton considered his suggestion carefully. 'I agree with you, something of the sort is probably necessary. A good idea, Renthall. Properly conducted, it might well provide just the lift people need.'

'The main question, Doctor, is one of organization. The only suitable place is the Town Hall.'

Clifton nodded. 'Yes, there's your problem. I'm afraid I've no influence with the Council, if that's what you're suggesting. I don't know what you can do. You'll have to get their permission of course, and in the past they haven't shown themselves to be very radical or original. They prefer to maintain the *status quo*.'

Renthall nodded, then added casually: 'They're only interested in maintaining their own power. At times I become rather tired of our Council.'

Clifton glanced at him and then turned back to his cages. 'You're preaching revolution, Renthall,' he said quietly, a forefinger stroking the beak of one of the canaries. Pointedly, he refrained from seeing Renthall to the door.

Writing the doctor off, Renthall rested for a few minutes in his room, pacing up and down the strip of faded carpet, then went down to the basement to see the manager, Mulvaney.

'I'm only making some initial inquiries. As yet I haven't applied for permission, but Dr Clifton thinks the idea is excellent, and there's no doubt we'll get it. Are you up to looking after the catering?'

Mulvaney's sallow face watched Renthall sceptically. 'Of course I'm up to it, but how serious are you?' He leaned against his roll-top desk. 'You think you'll get permission? You're wrong, Mr Renthall, the Council wouldn't stand for the idea. They even closed the cinema, so they're not likely to allow a public party. Before you know what you'd have people dancing.'

'I hardly think so, but does the idea appal you so much?'

Mulvaney shook his head, already bored with Renthall. 'You get a permit, Mr Renthall, and then we can talk seriously.'

Tightening his voice, Renthall asked: 'Is it necessary to get the Council's permission? Couldn't we go ahead without?'

Without looking up, Mulvaney sat down at his desk. 'Keep trying, Mr Renthall, it's a great idea.'

During the next few days Renthall pursued his inquiries, in all approaching some half-dozen people. In general he met with the same negative response, but as he intended he soon noticed a subtle but nonetheless distinct quickening of interest around him. The usual fragmentary murmur of conversation would fade away abruptly as he passed the tables in the dining room, and the service was fractionally more prompt. Hanson no longer took coffee with him in the mornings, and once Renthall saw him in guarded conversation with the town clerk's secretary, a young man called Barnes. This, he assumed, was Hanson's contact.

In the meantime the activity in the watch-towers remained at zero. The endless lines of towers hung down from the bright, hazy sky, the observation windows closed, and the people in the streets below sank slowly into their usual mindless torpor, wandering from hotel to library to café. Determined on his course of action, Renthall felt his confidence return.

Allowing an interval of a week to elapse, he finally called upon Victor Boardman.

The bootlegger received him in his office above the cinema, greeting him with a wry smile.

'Well, Mr Renthall, I hear you're going into the entertainment business. Drunken gambols and all that. I'm surprised at you.'

'A fête,' Renthall corrected. The seat Boardman had offered him faced towards the window – deliberately, he guessed – and provided an uninterrupted view of the watch-tower over the roof of the adjacent furniture store. Only forty feet away, it blocked off half the sky. The metal plates which formed its rectangular sides were annealed together by some process Renthall was unable to identify, neither welded nor riveted, almost as if the entire tower had been cast *in situ*. He moved to another chair so that his back was to the window.

'The school is still closed, so I thought I'd try to make myself useful. That's what I'm paid for. I've come to you because you've had a good deal of experience.'

'Yes, I've had a lot of experience, Mr Renthall. Very varied. As one of the Council's employees, I take it you have its permission?'

Renthall evaded this. 'The Council is naturally a conservative body, Mr Boardman. Obviously at this stage I'm acting on my own initiative. I shall consult the Council at the appropriate moment later, when I can offer them a practicable proposition.'

Boardman nodded sagely. 'That's sensible, Mr Renthall. Now what exactly do you want me to do? Organize the whole thing for you?'

'No, but naturally I'd be very grateful if you would. For the present I merely want to ask permission to hold the fête on a piece of your property.'

'The cinema? I'm not going to take all those seats out, if that's what you're after.'

'Not the cinema. Though we could use the bar and cloakrooms,' Renthall extemporized, hoping the scheme did not sound too grandiose. 'Is the old beer-garden next to the car park your property?'

For a moment Boardman was silent. He watched Renthall shrewdly, picking his nails with his cigar-cutter, a faint suggestion of admiration in his eyes. 'So you want to hold the fête in the open, Mr Renthall? Is that it?'

Renthall nodded, smiling back at Boardman. 'I'm glad to see you living up to your reputation for getting quickly to the point. Are you prepared to lend the garden? Of course, you'll have a big share of the profits. In fact, if it's any inducement, you can have all the profits.'

Boardman put out his cigar. 'Mr Renthall, you're obviously a man of many parts. I underestimated you. I thought you merely had a grievance against the Council. I hope you know what you're doing.'

'Mr Boardman, will you lend the garden?' Renthall repeated.

There was an amused but thoughtful smile on Boardman's lips as he regarded the watch-tower framed by the window. 'There are two watch-towers directly over the beer-garden, Mr Renthall.'

'I'm fully aware of that. It's obviously the chief attraction of the property. Now, can you give me an answer?'

The two men regarded each other silently, and then Boardman gave an almost imperceptible nod. Renthall realized that his scheme was being taken seriously by Boardman. He was obviously using Renthall for his own purposes, for once having flaunted the Council's authority he would be able to resume all his other, more profitable activities. Of course, the fête would never be held, but in answer to Boardman's questions he outlined a provisional programme. They fixed the date of the fête at a month ahead, and arranged to meet again at the beginning of the next week.

Two days later, as he expected, the first emissaries of the Council came to see him.

He was waiting at his usual table on the café terrace, the silent

watch-towers suspended from the air around him, when he saw Hanson hurrying along the street.

'Do join me.' Renthall drew a chair back. 'What's the news?'

'Nothing – though you should know, Charles.' He gave Renthall a dry smile, as if admonishing a favourite pupil, then gazed about the empty terrace for the waitress. 'Service is appallingly bad here. Tell me, Charles, what's all this talk about you and Victor Boardman. I could hardly believe my ears.'

Renthall leaned back in his chair. 'I don't know, you tell me.'

'We – er, I was wondering if Boardman was taking advantage of some perfectly innocent remark he might have overheard. This business of a garden party you're supposed to be organizing with him – it sounds absolutely fantastic.'

'Why?'

'But Charles.' Hanson leaned forward to examine Renthall carefully, trying to make sense of his unruffled pose. 'Surely you aren't serious?'

'But why not? If I want to, why shouldn't I organize a garden party – fête, to be more accurate?'

'It doesn't make an iota of difference,' Hanson said tartly. 'Apart from any other reason' – here he glanced skyward – 'the fact remains that you are an employee of the Council.'

Hands in his trouser-pockets, Renthall tipped back his chair. 'But that gives them no mandate to interfere in my private life. You seem to be forgetting, but the terms of my contract specifically exclude any such authority. I am not on the established grade, as my salary differential shows. If the Council disapprove, the only sanction they can apply is to give me the sack.'

'They will, Charles, don't sound so smug.'

Renthall let this pass. 'Fair enough, if they can find anyone else to take on the job. Frankly I doubt it. They've managed to swallow their moral scruples in the past.'

'Charles, this is different. As long as you're discreet no one gives a hoot about your private affairs, but this garden party is a public matter, and well within the Council's province.'

Renthall yawned. 'I'm rather bored with the subject of the Council. Technically, the fête will be a private affair, by invitation only. They've no statutory right to be consulted at all. If a breach of the peace takes place the Chief Constable can take action. Why all the fuss, anyway? I'm merely trying to provide a little harmless festivity.'

Hanson shook his head. 'Charles, you're deliberately evading the point. According to Boardman this fête will take place out of doors – directly under two of the watch-towers. Have you realized what the repercussions would be?'

'Yes.' Renthall formed the word carefully in his mouth. 'Nothing. Absolutely nothing.'

'Charles!' Hanson lowered his head at this apparent blasphemy, glanced

up at the watch-towers over the street as if expecting instant retribution to descend from them. 'Look, my dear fellow, take my advice. Drop the whole idea. You don't stand a chance anyway of ever holding this mad jape, so why deliberately court trouble with the Council? Who knows what their real power would be if they were provoked?'

Renthall rose from his seat. He looked up at the watch-tower hanging from the air on the other side of the road, controlling himself when a slight pang of anxiety stirred his heart. 'I'll send you an invitation,' he called back, then walked away to his hotel.

The next afternoon the town clerk's secretary called upon him in his room. During the interval, no doubt intended as a salutary pause for reflection, Renthall had remained at the hotel, reading quietly in his armchair. He paid one brief visit to Mrs Osmond, but she seemed nervous and irritable, evidently aware of the imminent clash. The strain of maintaining an appearance of unconcern had begun to tire Renthall, and he avoided the open streets whenever possible. Fortunately the school had still not opened.

Barnes, the dapper dark-haired secretary, came straight to the point. Refusing Renthall's offer of an armchair, he held a sheet of pink duplicated paper in his hand, apparently a minute of the last Council meeting.

'Mr Renthall, the Council has been informed of your intention to hold a garden fête in some three weeks' time. I have been asked by the chairman of the Watch Committee to express the committee's grave misgivings, and to request you accordingly to terminate all arrangements and cancel the fête immediately, pending an inquiry.'

'I'm sorry, Barnes, but I'm afraid our preparations are too far advanced. We're about to issue invitations.'

Barnes hesitated, casting his eye around Renthall's faded room and few shabby books as if hoping to find some ulterior motive for Renthall's behaviour.

'Mr Renthall, perhaps I could explain that this request is tantamount to a direct order from the Council.'

'So I'm aware.' Renthall sat down on his window-sill and gazed out at the watch-towers. 'Hanson and I went over all this, as you probably know. The Council have no more right to order me to cancel this fête than they have to stop me walking down the street.'

Barnes smiled his thin bureaucratic smirk. 'Mr Renthall, this is not a matter of the Council's statutory jurisdiction. This order is issued by virtue of the authority vested in it by its superiors. If you prefer, you can assume that the Council is merely passing on a direct instruction it has received.' He inclined his head towards the watch-towers.

Renthall stood up. 'Now we're at last getting down to business.' He gathered himself together. 'Perhaps you could tell the Council to convey to its superiors, as you call them, my polite but firm refusal. Do you get *my* point?'

Barnes retreated fractionally. He summed Renthall up carefully, then nodded. 'I think so, Mr Renthall. No doubt you understand what you're doing.'

After he had gone Renthall drew the blinds over the window and lay down on his bed; for the next hour he made an effort to relax.

His final showdown with the Council was to take place the following day. Summoned to an emergency meeting of the Watch Committee, he accepted the invitation with alacrity, certain that with every member of the committee present the main council chamber would be used. This would give him a perfect opportunity to humiliate the Council by publicly calling their bluff.

Both Hanson and Mrs Osmond assumed that he would capitulate without argument.

'Well, Charles, you brought it upon yourself,' Hanson told him. 'Still, I expect they'll be lenient with you. It's a matter of face now.'

'More than that, I hope,' Renthall replied. 'They claim they were passing on a direct instruction from the watch-towers.'

'Well, yes . . .' Hanson gestured vaguely. 'Of course. Obviously the towers wouldn't intervene in such a trivial matter. They rely on the Council to keep a watching brief for them, as long as the Council's authority is respected they're prepared to remain aloof.'

'It sounds an ideally simple arrangement. How do you think the communication between the Council and the watch-towers takes place?' Renthall pointed to the watch-tower across the street from the cabin. The shuttered observation tier hung emptily in the air like an out-of-season gondola. 'By telephone? Or do they semaphore?'

But Hanson merely laughed and changed the subject.

Julia Osmond was equally vague, but equally convinced of the Council's infallibility.

'Of course they receive instructions from the towers, Charles. But don't worry, they obviously have a sense of proportion – they've been letting you come here all this time.' She turned a monitory finger at Renthall, her broad-hipped bulk obscuring the towers from him. 'That's your chief fault, Charles. You think you're more important than you are. Look at you now, sitting there all hunched up with your face like an old shoe. You think the Council and the watch-towers are going to give you some terrible punishment. But they won't, because you're not worth it.'

Renthall picked uneagerly at his lunch at the hotel, conscious of the guests watching from the tables around him. Many had brought visitors with them, and he guessed that there would be a full attendance at the meeting that afternoon.

After lunch he retired to his room, made a desultory attempt to read until the meeting at half past two. Outside, the watch-towers hung in their long lines from the bright haze. There was no sign of movement in the observation windows, and Renthall studied them openly, hands in

pockets, like a general surveying the dispositions of his enemy's forces. The haze was lower than usual, filling the interstices between the towers, so that in the distance, where the free space below their tips was hidden by the intervening roof-tops, the towers seemed to rise upwards into the air like rectangular chimneys over an industrial landscape, wreathed in white smoke.

The nearest tower was about seventy-five feet away, diagonally to his left, over the eastern end of the open garden shared by the other hotels in the crescent. Just as Renthall turned away, one of the windows in the observation deck appeared to open, the opaque glass pane throwing a spear of sharp sunlight directly towards him. Renthall flinched back, heart suddenly surging, then leaned forward again. The activity in the tower had subsided as instantly as it had arisen. The windows were sealed, no signs of movement behind them. Renthall listened to the sounds from the rooms above and below him. So conspicuous a motion of the window, the first sign of activity for many days, and a certain indication of more to come, should have brought a concerted rush to the balconies. But the hotel was silent, and below he could hear Dr Clifton at his cages by the window, humming absently to himself.

Renthall scanned the windows on the other side of the garden but the lines of craning faces he expected were absent. He examined the watch-tower carefully, assuming that he had seen a window open in a hotel near by. Yet the explanation dissatisfied him. The ray of sunlight had cleft the air like a silver blade, with a curious luminous intensity that only the windows of the watch-towers seemed able to reflect, aimed unerringly at his head.

He broke off to glance at his watch, cursed when he saw that it was after a quarter past two. The Town Hall was a good half-mile away, and he would arrive dishevelled and perspiring.

There was a knock on his door. He opened it to find Mulvaney. 'What is it? I'm busy now.'

'Sorry, Mr Renthall. A man called Barnes from the Council asked me to give you an urgent message. He said the meeting this afternoon has been postponed.'

'Ha!' Leaving the door open, Renthall snapped his fingers contemptuously at the air. 'So they've had second thoughts after all. Discretion is the better part of valour.' Smiling broadly, he called Mulvaney back into his room. 'Mr Mulvaney! Just a moment!'

'Good news, Mr Renthall?'

'Excellent. I've got them on the run.' He added: 'You wait and see, the next meeting of the Watch Committee will be held in private.'

'You might be right, Mr Renthall. Some people think they have over-reached themselves a bit.'

'Really? That's rather interesting. Good.' Renthall noted this mentally, then gestured Mulvaney over to the window. 'Tell me, Mr Mulvaney, just

now while you were coming up the stairs, did you notice any activity out there?'

He gestured briefly towards the tower, not wanting to draw attention to himself by pointing at it. Mulvaney gazed out over the garden, shaking his head slowly. 'Can't say I did, not more than usual. What sort of activity?'

'You know, a window opening . . .' When Mulvaney continued to shake his head, Renthall said: 'Good. Let me know if that fellow Barnes calls again.'

When Mulvaney had gone he strode up and down the room, whistling a Mozart rondo.

Over the next three days, however, the mood of elation gradually faded. To Renthall's annoyance no further date was fixed for the cancelled committee meeting. He had assumed that it would be held *in camera*, but the members must have realized that it would make little difference. Everyone would soon know that Renthall had successfully challenged their claim to be in communication with the watch-towers.

Renthall chafed at the possibility that the meeting had been postponed indefinitely. By avoiding a direct clash with Renthall the Council had cleverly side-stepped the danger before them.

Alternatively, Renthall speculated whether he had underestimated them. Perhaps they realized that the real target of his defiance was not the Council, but the watch-towers. The faint possibility – however hard he tried to dismiss it as childish fantasy the fear still persisted – that there *was* some mysterious collusion between the towers and the Council now began to grow in his mind. The fête had been cleverly conceived as an innocent gesture of defiance towards the towers, and it would be difficult to find something to take its place that would not be blatantly outrageous and stain him indelibly with the sin of hubris.

Besides, as he carefully reminded himself, he was not out to launch open rebellion. Originally he had reacted from a momentary feeling of pique, exasperated by the spectacle of the boredom and lethargy around him and the sullen fear with which everyone viewed the towers. There was no question of challenging their absolute authority – at least, not at this stage. He merely wanted to define the existential margins of their world – if they *were* caught in a trap, let them at least eat the cheese. Also, he calculated that it would take an affront of truly heroic scale to provoke any reaction from the watch-towers, and that a certain freedom by default was theirs, a small but valuable credit to their account built into the system.

In practical, existential terms this might well be considerable, so that the effective boundary between black and white, between good and evil, was drawn some distance from the theoretical boundary. This watershed was the penumbral zone where the majority of the quickening pleasures of life were to be found, and where Renthall was most at home. Mrs Osmond's

villa lay well within its territory, and Renthall would have liked to move himself over its margins. First, though, he would have to assess the extent of this 'blue' shift, or moral parallax, but by cancelling the committee meeting the Council had effectively forestalled him.

As he waited for Barnes to call again a growing sense of frustration came over him. The watch-towers seemed to fill the sky, and he drew the blinds irritably. On the flat roof, two floors above, a continuous light hammering sounded all day, but he shunned the streets and no longer went to the café for his morning coffee.

Finally he climbed the stairs to the roof, through the doorway saw two carpenters working under Mulvaney's supervision. They were laying a rough board floor over the tarred cement. As he shielded his eyes from the bright glare a third man came up the stairs behind him, carrying two sections of wooden railing.

'Sorry about the noise, Mr Renthall,' Mulvaney apologized. 'We should be finished by tomorrow.'

'What's going on?' Renthall asked. 'Surely you're not putting a sun garden here.'

'That's the idea.' Mulvaney pointed to the railings. 'A few chairs and umbrellas, be pleasant for the old folk. Dr Clifton suggested it.' He peered down at Renthall, who was still hiding in the doorway. 'You'll have to bring a chair up here yourself, you look as if you could use a little sunshine.'

Renthall raised his eyes to the watch-tower almost directly over their heads. A pebble tossed underhand would easily have rebounded off the corrugated metal underside. The roof was completely exposed to the score of watch-towers hanging in the air around them, and he wondered whether Mulvaney was out of his mind – none of the old people would sit there for more than a second.

Mulvaney pointed to a roof-top on the other side of the garden, where similar activity was taking place. A bright yellow awning was being unfurled, and two seats were already occupied.

Renthall hesitated, lowering his voice. 'But what about the watch-towers?'

'The what –?' Distracted by one of the carpenters, Mulvaney turned away for a moment, then rejoined him. 'Yes, you'll be able to watch everything going on from up here, Mr Renthall.'

Puzzled, Renthall made his way back to his room. Had Mulvaney misheard his question, or was this a fatuous attempt to provoke the towers? Renthall grimly visualized his responsibility if a whole series of petty acts of defiance took place. Perhaps he had accidentally tapped all the repressed resentment that had been accumulating for years?

To Renthall's amazement, a succession of creaking ascents of the staircase the next morning announced the first party of residents to use the sun deck. Just before lunch Renthall went up to the roof, found a group of at least a dozen of the older guests sitting out below the watch-tower,

placidly inhaling the cool air. None of them seemed in the least perturbed by the tower. At two or three points around the crescent sun-bathers had emerged, as if answering some deep latent call. People sat on makeshift porches or leaned from the sills, calling to each other.

Equally surprising was the failure of this upsurge of activity to be followed by any reaction from the watch-towers. Half-hidden behind his blinds, Renthall scrutinized the towers carefully, once caught what seemed to be a distant flicker of movement from an observation window half a mile away, but otherwise the towers remained silent, their long ranks receding to the horizon in all directions, motionless and enigmatic. The haze had thinned slightly, and the long shafts protruded further from the sky, their outlines darker and more vibrant.

Shortly before lunch Hanson interrupted his scrutiny. 'Hello, Charles. Great news! The school opens tomorrow. Thank heaven for that, I was getting so bored I could hardly stand up straight.'

Renthall nodded. 'Good. What's galvanized them into life so suddenly?'

'Oh, I don't know. I suppose they had to reopen some time. Aren't you pleased?'

'Of course. Am I still on the staff?'

'Naturally. The Council doesn't bear childish grudges. They might have sacked you a week ago, but things are different now.'

'What do you mean?'

Hanson scrutinized Renthall carefully. 'I mean the school's opened. What is the matter, Charles?'

Renthall went over to the window, his eyes roving along the lines of sun-bathers on the roofs. He waited a few seconds in case there was some sign of activity from the watch-towers.

'When's the Watch Committee going to hear my case?'

Hanson shrugged. 'They won't bother now. They know you're a tougher proposition than some of the people they've been pushing around. Forget the whole thing.'

'But I don't want to forget it. I want the hearing to take place. Damn it, I deliberately invented the whole business of the fête to force them to show their hand. Now they're furiously back-pedalling.'

'Well, what of it? Relax, they have their difficulties too.' He gave a laugh. 'You never know, they'd probably be only too glad of an invitation now.'

'They won't get one. You know, I almost feel they've outwitted me. When the fête doesn't take place everyone will assume I've given in to them.'

'But it will take place. Haven't you seen Boardman recently? He's going great guns, obviously it'll be a tremendous show. Be careful he doesn't cut you out.'

Puzzled, Renthall turned from the window. 'Do you mean Boardman's going ahead with it?'

'Of course. It looks like it anyway. He's got a big marquee over the car park, dozens of stalls, bunting everywhere.'

Renthall drove a fist into his palm. 'The man's insane!' He turned to Hanson. 'We've got to be careful, something's going on. I'm convinced the Council are just biding their time, they're deliberately letting the reins go so we'll over-reach ourselves. Have you seen all these people on the roof-tops? Sun-bathing!'

'Good idea. Isn't that what you've wanted all along?'

'Not so blatantly as this.' Renthall pointed to the nearest watch-tower. The windows were sealed, but the light reflected off them was far brighter than usual. 'Sooner or later there'll be a short, sharp reaction. That's what the Council are waiting for.'

'It's nothing to do with the Council. If people want to sit on the roof whose business is it but their own? Are you coming to lunch?'

'In a moment.' Renthall stood quietly by the window, watching Hanson closely. A possibility he had not previously envisaged crossed his mind. He searched for some method of testing it. 'Has the gong gone yet? My watch has stopped.'

Hanson glanced at his wristwatch. 'It's twelve-thirty.' He looked out through the window towards the clock tower in the distance over the Town Hall. One of Renthall's long-standing grievances against his room was that the tip of the nearby watch-tower hung directly over the clock-face, neatly obscuring it. Hanson nodded, re-setting his watch. 'Twelve-thirty-one. I'll see you in a few minutes.'

After Hanson had gone Renthall sat on the bed, his courage ebbing slowly, trying to rationalize this unforeseen development.

The next day he came across his second case.

Boardman surveyed the dingy room distastefully, puzzled by the spectacle of Renthall hunched up in his chair by the window.

'Mr Renthall, there's absolutely no question of cancelling it now. The fair's as good as started already. Anyway, what would be the point?'

'Our arrangement was that it should be a fête,' Renthall pointed out. 'You've turned it into a fun-fair, with a lot of stalls and hurdy-gurdies.'

Unruffled by Renthall's schoolmasterly manner, Boardman scoffed. 'Well, what's the difference? Anyway, my real idea is to roof it over and turn it into a permanent amusement park. The Council won't interfere. They're playing it quiet now.'

'Are they? I doubt it.' Renthall looked down into the garden. People sat about in their shirt sleeves, the women in floral dresses, evidently oblivious of the watch-towers filling the sky a hundred feet above their heads. The haze had receded still further, and at least two hundred yards of shaft were now visible. There were no signs of activity from the towers, but Renthall was convinced that this would soon begin.

'Tell me,' he asked Boardman in a clear voice. 'Aren't you frightened of the watch-towers?'

Boardman seemed puzzled. 'The what towers?' He made a spiral motion with his cigar. 'You mean the big slide? Don't worry, I'm not having one of those, nobody's got the energy to climb all those steps.'

He stuck his cigar in his mouth and ambled to the door. 'Well, so long, Mr Renthall. I'll send you an invite.'

Later that afternoon Renthall went to see Dr Clifton in his room below.

'Excuse me, Doctor,' he apologized, 'but would you mind seeing me on a professional matter?'

'Well, not here, Renthall, I'm supposed to be off-duty.' He turned from his canary cages by the window with a testy frown, then relented when he saw Renthall's intent expression. 'All right, what's the trouble?'

While Clifton washed his hands Renthall explained. 'Tell me, Doctor, is there any mechanism known to you by which the simultaneous hypnosis of large groups of people could occur? We're all familiar with theatrical displays of the hypnotist's art, but I'm thinking of a situation in which the members of an entire small community – such as the residents of the hotels around this crescent – could be induced to accept a given proposition completely conflicting with reality.'

Clifton stopped washing his hands. 'I thought you wanted to see me professionally. I'm a doctor, not a witch doctor. What are you planning now, Renthall? Last week it was a fête, now you want to hypnotize an entire neighbourhood, you'd better be careful.'

Renthall shook his head. 'It's not I who want to carry out the hypnosis, Doctor. In fact I'm afraid the operation has already taken place. I don't know whether you've noticed anything strange about your patients?'

'Nothing more than usual,' Clifton remarked dryly. He watched Renthall with increased interest. 'Who's responsible for this mass hypnosis?' When Renthall paused and then pointed a forefinger at the ceiling Clifton nodded sagely. 'I see. How sinister.'

'Exactly. I'm glad you understand, Doctor.' Renthall went over to the window, looking out at the sunshades below. He pointed to the watch-towers. 'Just to clarify a small point, Doctor. You do see the watch-towers?'

Clifton hesitated fractionally, moving imperceptibly towards his valise on the desk. Then he nodded: 'Of course.'

'Good. I'm relieved to hear it.' Renthall laughed. 'For a while I was beginning to think that I was the only one in step. Do you realize that both Hanson and Boardman can no longer see the towers? And I'm fairly certain that none of the people down there can or they wouldn't be sitting in the open. I'm convinced that this is the Council's doing, but it seems unlikely that they would have enough power –' He broke off, aware that Clifton was watching him fixedly. 'What's the matter? *Doctor!*'

Clifton quickly took his prescription pad from his valise. 'Renthall, caution is the essence of all strategy. It's important that we beware of

over-hastiness. I suggest that we both rest this afternoon. Now, these will give you some sleep –'

For the first time in several days he ventured out into the street. Head down, angry for being caught out by the doctor, he drove himself along the pavement towards Mrs Osmond, determined to find at least one person who could still see the towers. The streets were more crowded than he could remember for a long time and he was forced to look upward as he swerved in and out of the ambling pedestrians. Overhead, like the assault craft from which some apocalyptic air-raid would be launched, the watch-towers hung down from the sky, framed between the twin spires of the church, blocking off a vista down the principal boulevard, yet unperceived by the afternoon strollers.

Renthall passed the café, surprised to see the terrace packed with coffee-drinkers, then saw Boardman's marquee in the cinema car park. Music was coming from a creaking wurlitzer, and the gay ribbons of the bunting fluttered in the air.

Twenty yards from Mrs Osmond's he saw her come through her front door, a large straw hat on her head.

'Charles! What are you doing here? I haven't seen you for days, I wondered what was the matter.'

Renthall took the key from her fingers and pushed it back into the lock. Closing the door behind them, he paused in the darkened hall, regaining his breath.

'Charles, what on earth is going on? Is someone after you? You look terrible, my dear. Your face –'

'Never mind my face.' Renthall collected himself, and led the way into the living room. 'Come in here, quickly.' He went over to the window and drew back the blinds, ascertained that the watch-tower over the row of houses opposite was still there. 'Sit down and relax. I'm sorry to rush in like this but you'll understand in a minute.' He waited until Mrs Osmond settled herself reluctantly on the sofa, then rested his palms on the mantelpiece, organizing his thoughts.

'The last few days have been fantastic, you wouldn't believe it, and to cap everything I've just made myself look the biggest possible fool in front of Clifton. God, I could –'

'Charles –!'

'*Listen!* Don't start interrupting me before I've begun, I've got enough to contend with. Something absolutely insane is going on everywhere, by some freak I seem to be the only one who's still *compos mentis*. I know that sounds as if I'm completely mad, but in fact it's true. Why, I don't know; though I'm frightened it may be some sort of reprisal directed at me. However.' He went over to the window. 'Julia, what can you see out of that window?'

Mrs Osmond dismantled her hat and squinted at the panes. She fidgeted

uncomfortably. 'Charles, what is going on? – I'll have to get my glasses.' She subsided helplessly.

'Julia! You've never needed your glasses before to see these. Now tell me, what can you see?'

'Well, the row of houses, and the gardens . . .'

'Yes, what else?'

'The windows, of course, and there's a tree . . .'

'What about the sky?'

She nodded. 'Yes, I can see that, there's a sort of haze, isn't there? Or is that my eyes?'

'No.' Wearily, Renthall turned away from the window. For the first time a feeling of unassuageable fatigue had come over him. 'Julia,' he asked quietly. 'Don't you remember the watch-towers?'

She shook her head slowly. 'No, I don't. Where were they?' A look of concern came over her face. She took his arm gently. 'Dear, what is going on?'

Renthall forced himself to stand upright. 'I don't know.' He drummed his forehead with his free hand. 'You can't remember the towers at all, or the observation windows?' He pointed to the watch-tower hanging down the centre of the window. 'There – used to be one over those houses. We were always looking at it. Do you remember how we used to draw the curtains upstairs?'

'Charles! Be careful, people will hear. Where are you going?'

Numbly, Renthall pulled back the door. 'Outside,' he said in a flat voice. 'There's little point now in staying indoors.'

He let himself through the front door, fifty yards from the house heard her call after him, turned quickly into a side road and hurried towards the first intersection.

Above him he was conscious of the watch-towers hanging in the bright air, but he kept his eyes level with the gates and hedges, scanning the empty houses. Now and then he passed one that was occupied, the family sitting out on the lawn, and once someone called his name, reminding him that the school had started without him. The air was fresh and crisp, the light glimmering off the pavements with an unusual intensity.

Within ten minutes he realized that he had wandered into an unfamiliar part of the town and completely lost himself, with only the aerial lines of watch-towers to guide him, but he still refused to look up at them.

He had entered a poorer quarter of the town, where the narrow empty streets were separated by large waste dumps, and tilting wooden fences sagged between ruined houses. Many of the dwellings were only a single storey high, and the sky seemed even wider and more open, the distant watch-towers along the horizon like a continuous palisade.

He twisted his foot on a ledge of stone, and hobbled painfully towards a strip of broken fencing that straddled a small rise in the centre of the waste dump. He was perspiring heavily, and loosened his tie, then searched the

surrounding straggle of houses for a way back into the streets through which he had come.

Overhead, something moved and caught his eye. Forcing himself to ignore it, Renthall regained his breath, trying to master the curious dizziness that touched his brain. An immense sudden silence hung over the waste ground, so absolute that it was as if some inaudible piercing music was being played at full volume.

To his right, at the edge of the waste ground, he heard feet shuffle slowly across the rubble, and saw the elderly man in the shabby black suit and wing collar who usually loitered outside the Public Library. He hobbled along, hands in pockets, an almost Chaplinesque figure, his weak eyes now and then feebly scanning the sky as if he were searching for something he had lost or forgotten.

Renthall watched him cross the waste ground, but before he could shout the decrepit figure tottered away behind a ruined wall.

Again something moved above him, followed by a third sharp angular motion, and then a succession of rapid shuttles. The stony rubbish at his feet flickered with the reflected light, and abruptly the whole sky sparkled as if the air was opening and shutting.

Then, as suddenly, everything was motionless again.

Composing himself, Renthall waited for a last moment. Then he raised his face to the nearest watch-tower fifty feet above him, and gazed across at the hundreds of towers that hung from the clear sky like giant pillars. The haze had vanished and the shafts of the towers were defined with unprecedented clarity.

As far as he could see, all the observation windows were open. Silently, without moving, the watchers stared down at him.

1962

THE SINGING STATUES

Again last night, as the dusk air began to move across the desert from Lagoon West, I heard fragments of music coming in on the thermal rollers, remote and fleeting, echoes of the love-song of Lunora Goalen. Walking out over the copper sand to the reefs where the sonic sculptures grow, I wandered through the darkness among the metal gardens, searching for Lunora's voice. No one tends the sculptures now and most of them have gone to seed, but on an impulse I cut away a helix and carried it back to my villa, planting it in the quartz bed below the balcony. All night it sang to me, telling me of Lunora and the strange music she played to herself . . .

It must be just over three years ago that I first saw Lunora Goalen, in Georg Nevers's gallery on Beach Drive. Every summer at the height of the season at Vermilion Sands, Georg staged a special exhibition of sonic sculpture for the tourists. Shortly after we opened one morning I was sitting inside my large statue, *Zero Orbit*, plugging in the stereo amplifiers, when Georg suddenly gasped into the skin mike and a boom like a thunderclap nearly deafened me.

Head ringing like a gong, I climbed out of the sculpture ready to crown Georg with a nearby maquette. Putting an elegant fingertip to his lips, he gave me that look which between artist and dealer signals one thing: *Rich client.*

The sculptures in the gallery entrance had begun to hum as someone came in, but the sunlight reflected off the bonnet of a white Rolls-Royce outside obscured the doorway.

Then I saw her, hovering over the stand of art journals, followed by her secretary, a tall purse-mouthed Frenchwoman almost as famous from the news magazines as her mistress.

Lunora Goalen, I thought, can *all* our dreams come true? She wore an ice-cool sliver of blue silk that shimmered as she moved towards the first statue, a toque hat of black violets and bulky dark glasses that hid her face and were a nightmare to cameramen. While she paused by the statue, one of Arch Penko's frenetic tangles that looked like a rimless bicycle wheel, listening to its arms vibrate and howl, Nevers and I involuntarily steadied ourselves against the wing-piece of my sculpture.

* * *

In general it's probably true that the most maligned species on Earth is the wealthy patron of modern art. Laughed at by the public, exploited by dealers, even the artists regard them simply as meal tickets. Lunora Goalen's superb collection of sonic sculpture on the roof of her Venice palazzo, and the million dollars' worth of generous purchases spread around her apartments in Paris, London and New York, represented freedom and life to a score of sculptors, but few felt any gratitude towards Miss Goalen.

Nevers was hesitating, apparently suffering from a sudden intention tremor, so I nudged his elbow.

'Come on,' I murmured. 'This is the apocalypse. Let's go.'

Nevers turned on me icily, noticing, apparently for the first time, my rust-stained slacks and three-day stubble.

'Milton!' he snapped. 'For God's sake, vanish! Sneak out through the freight exit.' He jerked his head at my sculpture. 'And switch that insane thing off! How did I ever let it in here?'

Lunora's secretary, Mme Charcot, spotted us at the rear of the gallery. Georg shot out four inches of immaculate cuff and swayed forward, the smile on his face as wide as a bulldozer. I backed away behind my sculpture, with no intention of leaving and letting Nevers cut my price just for the cachet of making a sale to Lunora Goalen.

Georg was bowing all over the gallery, oblivious of Mme Charcot's contemptuous sneer. He led Lunora over to one of the exhibits and fumbled with the control panel, selecting the alto lift which would resonate most flatteringly with her own body tones. Unfortunately the statue was Sigismund Lubitsch's *Big End*, a squat bull-necked drum like an enormous toad that at its sweetest emitted a rasping grunt. An old-style railroad tycoon might have elicited a sympathetic chord from it, but its response to Lunora was like a bull's to a butterfly.

They moved on to another sculpture, and Mme Charcot gestured to the white-gloved chauffeur standing by the Rolls. He climbed in and moved the car down the street, taking with it the beach crowds beginning to gather outside the gallery. Able now to see Lunora clearly against the hard white walls, I stepped into *Orbit* and watched her closely through the helixes.

Of course I already knew everything about Lunora Goalen. A thousand magazine exposés had catalogued *ad nauseam* her strange flawed beauty, her fits of melancholy and compulsive roving around the world's capitals. Her brief career as a film actress had faltered at first, less as a consequence of her modest, though always interesting, talents than of her simple failure to register photogenically. By a macabre twist of fate, after a major car accident had severely injured her face she had become an extraordinary success. That strangely marred profile and nervous gaze had filled cinemas from Paris to Pernambuco. Unable to bear this tribute to her plastic surgeons, Lunora had abruptly abandoned her career and become a

leading patron of the fine arts. Like Garbo in the '40s and '50s, she flitted elusively through the gossip columns and society pages in unending flight from herself.

Her face was the clue. As she took off her sunglasses I could see the curious shadow that fell across it, numbing the smooth white skin. There was a dead glaze in her slate-blue eyes, an uneasy tension around the mouth. Altogether I had a vague impression of something unhealthy, of a Venus with a secret vice.

Nevers was switching on sculptures right and left like a lunatic magician, and the noise was a babel of competing senso-cells, some of the statues responding to Lunora's enigmatic presence, others to Nevers and the secretary.

Lunora shook her head slowly, mouth hardening as the noise irritated her. 'Yes, Mr Nevers,' she said in her slightly husky voice, 'it's all very clever, but a bit of a headache. I *live* with my sculpture, I want something intimate and personal.'

'Of course, Miss Goalen,' Nevers agreed hurriedly, looking around desperately. As he knew only too well, sonic sculpture was now nearing the apogee of its abstract phase; twelve-tone blips and zooms were all that most statues emitted. No purely representational sound, responding to Lunora, for example, with a Mozart rondo or (better) a Webern quartet, had been built for ten years. I guessed that her early purchases were wearing out and that she was hunting the cheaper galleries in tourist haunts like Vermilion Sands in the hope of finding something designed for middle-brow consumption.

Lunora looked up pensively at *Zero Orbit*, towering at the rear of the gallery next to Nevers's desk, apparently unaware that I was hiding inside it. Suddenly realizing that the possibility of selling the statue had miraculously arisen, I crouched inside the trunk and started to breathe heavily, activating the senso-circuits.

Immediately the statue came to life. About twelve feet high, it was shaped like an enormous metal totem topped by two heraldic wings. The microphones in the wing-tips were powerful enough to pick up respiratory noises at a distance of twenty feet. There were four people well within focus, and the statue began to emit a series of low rhythmic pulses.

Seeing the statue respond to her, Lunora came forwards with interest. Nevers backed away discreetly, taking Mme Charcot with him, leaving Lunora and I together, separated by a thin metal skin and three feet of vibrating air. Fumbling for some way of widening the responses, I eased up the control slides that lifted the volume. Neurophonics has never been my strong suit – I regard myself, in an old-fashioned way, as a sculptor, not an electrician – and the statue was only equipped to play back a simple sequence of chord variations on the sonic profile in focus.

Knowing that Lunora would soon realize that the statue's repertory was too limited for her, I picked up the hand-mike used for testing

the circuits and on the spur of the moment began to croon the refrain from Creole Love Call. Reinterpreted by the sonic cores, and then relayed through the loudspeakers, the lulling rise and fall was pleasantly soothing, the electronic overtones disguising my voice and amplifying the tremors of emotion as I screwed up my courage (the statue was priced at five thousand dollars – even subtracting Nevers's 90 per cent commission left me with enough for the bus fare home).

Stepping up to the statue, Lunora listened to it motionlessly, eyes wide with astonishment, apparently assuming that it was reflecting, like a mirror, its subjective impressions of herself. Rapidly running out of breath, my speeding pulse lifting the tempo, I repeated the refrain over and over again, varying the bass lift to simulate a climax.

Suddenly I saw Nevers's black patent shoes through the hatch. Pretending to slip his hand into the control panel, he rapped sharply on the statue. I switched off.

'Don't please!' Lunora cried as the sounds fell away. She looked around uncertainly. Mme Charcot was stepping nearer with a curiously watchful expression.

Nevers hesitated. 'Of course, Miss Goalen, it still requires tuning, you –'

'I'll take it,' Lunora said. She pushed on her sunglasses, turned and hurried from the gallery, her face hidden.

Nevers watched her go. 'What happened, for heaven's sake? Is Miss Goalen all right?'

Mme Charcot took a cheque-book out of her blue crocodile handbag. A sardonic smirk played over her lips, and through the helix I had a brief but penetrating glimpse into her relationship with Lunora Goalen. It was then, I think, that I realized Lunora might be something more than a bored dilettante.

Mme Charcot glanced at her watch, a gold pea strung on her scrawny wrist. 'You will have it delivered today. By three o'clock sharp. Now, please, the price?'

Smoothly, Nevers said: 'Ten thousand dollars.'

Choking, I pulled myself out of the statue, and spluttered helplessly at Nevers.

Mme Charcot regarded me with astonishment, frowning at my filthy togs. Nevers trod savagely on my foot. 'Naturally, Mademoiselle, our prices are modest, but as you can see, M. Milton is an inexperienced artist.'

Mme Charcot nodded sagely. 'This is the sculptor? I am relieved. For a moment I feared that he lived in it.'

When she had gone Nevers closed the gallery for the day. He took off his jacket and pulled a bottle of absinthe from the desk. Sitting back in his silk waistcoat, he trembled slightly with nervous exhaustion.

'Tell me, Milton, how can you ever be sufficiently grateful to me?'

I patted him on the back. 'Georg, you were brilliant! She's another Catherine the Great, you handled her like a diplomat. When you go to Paris you'll be a great success. Ten thousand dollars!' I did a quick jig around the statue. 'That's the sort of redistribution of wealth I like to see. How about an advance on my cut?'

Nevers examined me moodily. He was already in the Rue de Rivoli, over-bidding for Leonardos with a languid flicker of a pomaded eyebrow. He glanced at the statue and shuddered. 'An extraordinary woman. Completely without taste. Which reminds me, I see you rescored the memory drum. The aria from *Tosca* cued in beautifully. I didn't realize the statue contained that.'

'It doesn't,' I told him, sitting on the desk. 'That was me. Not exactly Caruso, I admit, but then he wasn't much of a sculptor –'

'What?' Nevers leapt out of his chair. 'Do you mean you were using the hand microphone? You *fool!*'

'What does it matter? She won't know.' Nevers was groaning against the wall, drumming his forehead on his fist. 'Relax, you'll hear nothing.'

Promptly at 9.01 the next morning the telephone rang.

As I drove the pick-up out to Lagoon West Nevers's warnings rang in my ears – '. . . six international blacklists, sue me for misrepresentation . . .' He apologized effusively to Mme Charcot, and assured her that the monotonous booming the statue emitted was most certainly not its natural response. Obviously a circuit had been damaged in transit, the sculptor himself was driving out to correct it.

Taking the beach road around the lagoon, I looked across at the Goalen mansion, an abstract summer palace that reminded me of a Frank Lloyd Wright design for an experimental department store. Terraces jutted out at all angles, and here and there were huge metal sculptures, Brancusi's and Calder mobiles, revolving in the crisp desert light. Occasionally one of the sonic statues hooted mournfully like a distant hoodoo.

Mme Charcot collected me in the vestibule, led me up a sweeping glass stairway. The walls were heavy with Dali and Picasso, but my statue had been given the place of honour at the far end of the south terrace. The size of a tennis court, without rails (or safety net), this jutted out over the lagoon against the skyline of Vermilion Sands, low furniture grouped in a square at its centre.

Dropping the tool-bag, I made a pretence of dismantling the control panel, and played with the amplifier so that the statue let out a series of staccato blips. These put it into the same category as the rest of Lunora Goalen's sculpture. A dozen pieces stood about on the terrace, most of them early period sonic dating back to the '70s, when sculptors produced an incredible sequence of grunting, clanking, barking and twanging statues, and galleries and public squares all over the world echoed night and day with minatory booms and thuds.

'Any luck?'

I turned to see Lunora Goalen. Unheard, she had crossed the terrace, now stood with hands on hips, watching me with interest. In her black slacks and shirt, blonde hair around her shoulders, she looked more relaxed, but sunglasses still masked her face.

'Just a loose valve. It won't take me a couple of minutes.' I gave her a reassuring smile and she stretched out on the chaise longue in front of the statue. Lurking by the french windows at the far end of the terrace was Mme Charcot, eyeing us with a beady smirk. Irritated, I switched on the statue to full volume and coughed loudly into the hand-mike.

The sound boomed across the open terrace like an artillery blank. The old crone backed away quickly.

Lunora smiled as the echoes rolled over the desert, the statues on the lower terraces responding with muted pulses. 'Years ago, when Father was away, I used to go on to the roof and shout at the top of my voice, set off the most wonderful echo trains. The whole place would boom for hours, drive the servants mad.' She laughed pleasantly to herself at the recollection, as if it had been a long time ago.

'Try it now,' I suggested. 'Or is Mme Charcot mad already?'

Lunora put a green-tipped finger to her lips. 'Carefully, you'll get me into trouble. Anyway, Mme Charcot is not my servant.'

'No? What is she then, your jailer?' We spoke mockingly, but I put a curve on the question; something about the Frenchwoman had made me suspect that she might have more than a small part in maintaining Lunora's illusions about herself.

I waited for Lunora to reply, but she ignored me and stared out across the lagoon. Within a few seconds her personality had changed levels, once again she was the remote autocratic princess.

Unobserved, I slipped my hand into the tool-bag and drew out a tape spool. Clipping it into the player deck, I switched on the table. The statue vibrated slightly, and a low melodious chant murmured out into the still air.

Standing behind the statue, I watched Lunora respond to the music. The sounds mounted, steadily swelling as Lunora moved into the statue's focus. Gradually its rhythms quickened, its mood urgent and plaintive, unmistakably a lover's passion-song. A musicologist would have quickly identified the sounds as a transcription of the balcony duet from *Romeo and Juliet*, but to Lunora its only source was the statue. I had recorded the tape that morning, realizing it was the only method of saving the statue. Nevers's confusion of *Tosca* and 'Creole Love Call' reminded me that I had the whole of classical opera in reserve. For ten thousand dollars I would gladly call once a day and feed in every aria from *Figaro* to *Moses and Aaron*.

Abruptly, the music fell away. Lunora had backed out of the statue's focus, and was standing twenty feet from me. Behind her, in the doorway, was Mme Charcot.

Lunora smiled briefly. 'It seems to be in perfect order,' she said. Without doubt she was gesturing me towards the door.

I hesitated, suddenly wondering whether to tell her the truth, my eyes searching her beautiful secret face. Then Mme Charcot came between us, smiling like a skull.

Did Lunora Goalen really believe that the sculpture was singing to her? For a fortnight, until the tape expired, it didn't matter. By then Nevers would have cashed the cheque and he and I would be on our way to Paris.

Within two or three days, though, I realized that I wanted to see Lunora again. Rationalizing, I told myself that the statue needed to be checked, that Lunora might discover the fraud. Twice during the next week I drove out to the summer-house on the pretext of tuning the sculpture, but Mme Charcot held me off. Once I telephoned, but again she intercepted me. When I saw Lunora she was driving at speed through Vermilion Sands in the Rolls-Royce, a dim glimmer of gold and jade in the back seat.

Finally I searched through my record albums, selected Toscanini conducting *Tristan and Isolde*, in the scene where Tristan mourns his parted lover, and carefully transcribed another tape.

That night I drove down to Lagoon West, parked my car by the beach on the south shore and walked out on to the surface of the lake. In the moonlight the summer-house half a mile away looked like an abstract movie set, a single light on the upper terrace illuminating the outlines of my statue. Stepping carefully across the fused silica, I made my way slowly towards it, fragments of the statue's song drifting by on the low breeze. Two hundred yards from the house I lay down on the warm sand, watching the lights of Vermilion Sands fade one by one like the melting jewels of a necklace.

Above, the statue sang into the blue night, its song never wavering. Lunora must have been sitting only a few feet above it, the music enveloping her like an overflowing fountain. Shortly after two o'clock it died down and I saw her at the rail, the white ermine wrap around her shoulders stirring in the wind as she stared at the brilliant moon.

Half an hour later I climbed the lake wall and walked along it to the spiral fire escape. The bougainvillaea wreathed through the railings muffled the sounds of my feet on the metal steps. I reached the upper terrace unnoticed. Far below, in her quarters on the north side, Mme Charcot was asleep.

Swinging on to the terrace, I moved among the dark statues, drawing low murmurs from them as I passed.

I crouched inside *Zero Orbit*, unlocked the control panel and inserted the fresh tape, slightly raising the volume.

As I left I could see on to the west terrace twenty feet below, where Lunora lay asleep under the stars on an enormous velvet bed, like a lunar princess on a purple catafalque. Her face shone in the starlight, her loose hair veiling her naked breasts. Behind her a statue

stood guard, intoning, softly to itself as it pulsed to the sounds of her breathing.

Three times I visited Lunora's house after midnight, taking with me another spool of tape, another love-song from my library. On the last visit I watched her sleeping until dawn rose across the desert. I fled down the stairway and across the sand, hiding among the cold pools of shadow whenever a car moved along the beach road.

All day I waited by the telephone in my villa, hoping she would call me. In the evening I walked out to the sand reefs, climbed one of the spires and watched Lunora on the terrace after dinner. She lay on a couch before the statue, and until long after midnight it played to her, endlessly singing. Its voice was now so strong that cars would slow down several hundred yards away, the drivers searching for the source of the melodies crossing the vivid evening air.

At last I recorded the final tape, for the first time in my own voice. Briefly I described the whole sequence of imposture, and quietly asked Lunora if she would sit for me and let me design a new sculpture to replace the fraud she had bought.

I clenched the tape tightly in my hand while I walked across the lake, looking up at the rectangular outline of the terrace.

As I reached the wall, a black-suited figure put his head over the ledge and looked down at me. It was Lunora's chauffeur.

Startled, I moved away across the sand. In the moonlight the chauffeur's white face flickered bonily.

The next evening, as I knew it would, the telephone finally rang.

'Mr Milton, the statue has broken down again.' Mme Charcot's voice sounded sharp and strained. 'Miss Goalen is extremely upset. You must come and repair it. Immediately.'

I waited an hour before leaving, playing through the tape I had recorded the previous evening. This time I would be present when Lunora heard it.

Mme Charcot was standing by the glass doors. I parked in the court by the Rolls. As I walked over to her, I noticed how eerie the house sounded. All over it the statues were muttering to themselves, emitting snaps and clicks, like the disturbed occupants of a zoo settling down with difficulty after a storm. Even Mme Charcot looked worn and tense.

At the terrace she paused. 'One moment, Mr Milton. I will see if Miss Goalen is ready to receive you.' She walked quietly towards the chaise longue pulled against the statue at the end of the terrace. Lunora was stretched out awkwardly across it, her hair disarrayed. She sat up irritably as Mme Charcot approached.

'Is he here? Alice, whose car was that? Hasn't he come?'

'He is preparing his equipment,' Mme Charcot told her soothingly. 'Miss Lunora, let me dress your hair –'

'Alice, don't fuss! God, what's keeping him?' She sprang up and paced over to the statue, glowering silently out of the darkness. While Mme Charcot walked away Lunora sank on her knees before the statue, pressed her right cheek to its cold surface.

Uncontrollably she began to sob, deep spasms shaking her shoulders.

'Wait, Mr Milton!' Mme Charcot held tightly to my elbow. 'She will not want to see you for a few minutes.' She added: 'You are a better sculptor than you think, Mr Milton. You have given that statue a remarkable voice. It tells her all she needs to know.'

I broke away and ran through the darkness.

'Lunora!'

She looked around, the hair over her face matted with tears. She leaned limply against the dark trunk of the statue. I knelt down and held her hands, trying to lift her to her feet.

She wrenched away from me. 'Fix it! Hurry, what are you waiting for? Make the statue sing again!'

I was certain that she no longer recognized me. I stepped back, the spool of tape in my hand. 'What's the matter with her?' I whispered to Mme Charcot. 'The sounds don't really come from the statue, surely she realizes that?'

Mme Charcot's head lifted. 'What do you mean – not from the statue?'

I showed her the tape. 'This isn't a true sonic sculpture. The music is played off these magnetic tapes.'

A chuckle rasped briefly from Mme Charcot's throat. 'Well, put it in none the less, monsieur. She doesn't care where it comes from. She is interested in the statue, not you.'

I hesitated, watching Lunora, still hunched like a supplicant at the foot of the statue.

'You mean –?' I started to say incredulously. 'So you mean she's in love with the statue?'

Mme Charcot's eyes summed up all my naivety.

'Not with the statue,' she said. 'With *herself.*'

For a moment I stood there among the murmuring sculptures, dropped the spool on the floor and turned away.

They left Lagoon West the next day.

For a week I remained at my villa, then drove along the beach road towards the summer-house one evening after Nevers told me that they had gone.

The house was closed, the statues standing motionless in the darkness. My footsteps echoed away among the balconies and terraces, and the house reared up into the sky like a tomb. All the sculptures had been switched off, and I realized how dead and monumental non-sonic sculpture must have seemed.

Zero Orbit had also gone. I assumed that Lunora had taken it with her, so immersed in her self-love that she preferred a clouded mirror which had once told her of her beauty to no mirror at all. As she sat on some penthouse veranda in Venice or Paris, with the great statue towering into the dark sky like an extinct symbol, she would hear again the lays it had sung.

Six months later Nevers commissioned another statue from me. I went out one dusk to the sand reefs where the sonic sculptures grow. As I approached, they were creaking in the wind whenever the thermal gradients cut through them. I walked up the long slopes, listening to them mewl and whine, searching for one that would serve as the sonic core for a new statue.

Somewhere ahead in the darkness, I heard a familiar phrase, a garbled fragment of a human voice. Startled, I ran on, feeling between the dark barbs and helixes.

Then, lying in a hollow below the ridge, I found the source. Half-buried under the sand like the skeleton of an extinct bird were twenty or thirty pieces of metal, the dismembered trunk and wings of my statue. Many of the pieces had taken root again and were emitting a thin haunted sound, disconnected fragments of the testament to Lunora Goalen I had dropped on her terrace.

As I walked down the slope, the white sand poured into my footprints like a succession of occluding hourglasses. The sounds of my voice whined faintly through the metal gardens like a forgotten lover whispering over a dead harp.

1962

THE MAN ON THE 99TH FLOOR

All day Forbis had been trying to reach the 100th floor. Crouched at the foot of the short stairway behind the elevator shaft, he stared up impotently at the swinging metal door on to the roof, searching for some means of dragging himself up to it. There were eleven narrow steps, and then the empty roof deck, the high grilles of the suicide barrier and the open sky. Every three minutes an airliner went over, throwing a fleeting shadow down the steps, its jets momentarily drowning the panic which jammed his mind, and each time he made another attempt to reach the doorway.

Eleven steps. He had counted them a thousand times, in the hours since he first entered the building at ten o'clock that morning and rode the elevator up to the 95th floor. He had walked the next floor – the floors were fakes, offices windowless and unserviced, tacked on merely to give the building the cachet of a full century – then waited quietly at the bottom of the final stairway, listening to the elevator cables wind and drone, hoping to calm himself. As usual, however, his pulse started to race, within two or three minutes was up to one hundred and twenty. When he stood up and reached for the hand-rail something clogged his nerve centres, caissons settled on to the bed of his brain, rooting him to the floor like a lead colossus.

Fingering the rubber cleats on the bottom step, Forbis glanced at his wristwatch. 4.20 p.m. If he wasn't careful someone would climb the stairs up to the roof and find him there – already there were half a dozen buildings around the city where he was *persona non grata*, elevator boys warned to call the house detectives if they saw him. And there were not all that many buildings with a hundred floors. That was part of his obsession. There had to be one hundred exactly.

Why? Leaning back against the wall, Forbis managed to ask himself the question. What role was he playing out, searching the city for hundred-storey skyscrapers, then performing this obsessive ritual which invariably ended in the same way, the final peak always unscaled? Perhaps it was some sort of abstract duel between himself and the architects of these monstrous piles (dimly he remembered working in a menial job below the city streets – perhaps he was rebelling and reasserting himself, the prototype of urban ant-man trying to over-topple the totem towers of Megalopolis?)

* * *

Aligning itself on the glideway, an airliner began its final approach over the city, its six huge jets blaring. As the noise hammered across him, Forbis pulled himself to his feet and lowered his head, passively letting the sounds drive down into his mind and loosen his blocked feedbacks. Lifting his right foot, he lowered it on to the first step, clasped the rail and pulled himself up two steps.

His left leg swung freely. Relief surged through him. At last he was going to reach the door! He took another step, raised his foot to the fourth, only seven from the top, then realized that his left hand was locked to the hand-rail below. He tugged at it angrily, but the fingers were clamped together like steel bands, the thumbnail biting painfully into his index tip.

He was still trying to unclasp the hand when the aircraft had gone.

Half an hour later, as the daylight began to fade, he sat down on the bottom step, with his free right hand pulled off one of his shoes and dropped it through the railing into the elevator shaft.

Vansittart put the hypodermic away in his valise, watching Forbis thoughtfully.

'You're lucky you didn't kill anyone,' he said. 'The elevator cabin was thirty storeys down, your shoe went through the roof like a bomb.'

Forbis shrugged vaguely, letting himself relax on the couch. The Psychology Department was almost silent, the last of the lights going out in the corridor as the staff left the medical school on their way home. 'I'm sorry, but there was no other way of attracting attention. I was fastened to the stair-rail like a dying limpet. How did you calm the manager down?'

Vansittart sat on the edge of his desk, turning away the lamp.

'It wasn't easy. Luckily Professor Bauer was still in his office and he cleared me over the phone. A week from now, though, he retires. Next time I may not be able to bluff my way through. I think we'll have to take a more direct line. The police won't be so patient with you.'

'I know. I'm afraid of that. But if I can't go on trying my brain will fuse. Didn't you get any clues at all?'

Vansittart murmured noncommittally. In fact the events had followed exactly the same pattern as on the three previous occasions. Again the attempt to reach the open roof had failed, and again there was no explanation for Forbis's compulsive drive. Vansittart had first seen him only a month earlier, wandering about blankly on the observation roof of the new administration building at the medical school. How he had gained access to the roof Vansittart had never discovered. Luckily one of the janitors had telephoned him that a man was behaving suspiciously on the roof, and Vansittart had reached him just before the suicide attempt.

At least, that was what it appeared to be. Vansittart examined the little man's placid grey features, his small shoulders and thin hands. There was

something anonymous about him. He was minimal urban man, as near a nonentity as possible, without friends or family, a vague background of forgotten jobs and rooming houses. The sort of lonely, helpless man who might easily, in an unthinking act of despair, try to throw himself off a roof.

Yet there was something that puzzled Vansittart. Strictly, as a member of the university teaching staff, he should not have prescribed any treatment for Forbis and instead should have handed him over promptly to the police surgeon at the nearest station. But a curious nagging suspicion about Forbis had prevented him from doing so. Later, when he began to analyse Forbis, he found that his personality, or what there was of it, seemed remarkably well integrated, and that he had a realistic, pragmatic approach towards life which was completely unlike the over-compensated self-pity of most would-be suicides.

Nevertheless, he was driven by an insane compulsion, this apparently motiveless impulse to the 100th floor. Despite all Vansittart's probings and tranquillizers Forbis had twice set off for the down-town sector of the city, picked a skyscraper and trapped himself in his eyrie on the 99th floor, on both occasions finally being rescued by Vansittart.

Deciding to play a hunch, Vansittart asked: 'Forbis, have you ever experimented with hypnosis?'

Forbis shifted himself drowsily, then shook his head. 'Not as far as I can remember. Are you hinting that someone has given me a post-hypnotic suggestion, trying to make me throw myself off a roof?'

That was quick of you, Vansittart thought. 'Why do you say that?' he asked.

'I don't know. But who would try? And what would be the point?' He peered up at Vansittart. 'Do you think someone did?'

Vansittart nodded. 'Oh yes. There's no doubt about it.' He sat forward, swinging the lamp around for emphasis. 'Listen, Forbis, some time ago, I can't be sure how long, three months, perhaps six, someone planted a really powerful post-hypnotic command in your mind. The first part of it – "*Go up to the 100th floor*" – I've been able to uncover, but the rest is still buried. It's that half of the command which worries me. One doesn't need a morbid imagination to guess what it probably is.'

Forbis moistened his lips, shielding his eyes from the glare of the lamp. He felt too sluggish to be alarmed by what Vansittart had just said. Despite the doctor's frank admission of failure, and his deliberate but rather nervous manner, he trusted Vansittart, and was confident he would find a solution. 'It sounds insane,' he commented. 'But who would want to kill me? Can't you cancel the whole thing out, erase the command?'

'I've tried to, but without any success. I've been getting nowhere. It's still as strong as ever – stronger, in fact, almost as if it were being reinforced. Where have you been during the last week? Who have you seen?'

Forbis shrugged, sitting up on one elbow. 'No one. As far as I can remember, I've only been on the 99th floor.' He searched the air dismally, then gave up. 'You know, I can't remember a single thing, just vague outlines of cafés and bus depots, it's strange.'

'A pity. I'd try to keep an eye on you, but I can't spare the time. Bauer's retirement hadn't been expected for another year, there's a tremendous amount of reorganization to be done.' He drummed his fingers irritably on the desk. 'I noticed you've still got some cash with you. Have you had a job?'

'I think so – in the subway, perhaps. Or did I just take a train . . . ?' Forbis frowned with the effort of recollection. 'I'm sorry, Doctor. Anyway, I've always heard that post-hypnotic suggestions couldn't compel you to do anything that clashed with your basic personality.'

'What is the basic personality, though? A skilful analyst can manipulate the psyche to suit the suggestion, magnify a small streak of self-destruction until it cleaves the entire personality like an axe splitting a log.'

Forbis pondered this gloomily for a few moments, then brightened slightly. 'Well, I seem to have the suggestion beaten. Whatever happens, I can't actually reach the roof, so I must have enough strength to fight it.'

Vansittart shook his head. 'As a matter of fact, you haven't. It's not you who's keeping yourself off the roof, it's *me.*'

'What do you mean?'

'I implanted another hypnotic suggestion, holding you on the 99th floor. When I uncovered the first suggestion I tried to erase it, found I wasn't even scratching the surface, so just as a precaution I inserted a second of my own. "*Get off at the 99th floor.*" How long it will hold you there I don't know, but already it's fading. Today it took you over seven hours to call me. Next time you may get up enough steam to hit the roof. That's why I think we should take a new line, really get to the bottom of this obsession, or rather' – he smiled ruefully – 'to the top.'

Forbis sat up slowly, massaging his face. 'What do you suggest?'

'We'll let you reach the roof. I'll erase my secondary command and we'll see what happens when you step out on to the top deck. Don't worry, I'll be with you if anything goes wrong. It may seem pretty thin consolation, but frankly, Forbis, it would be so easy to kill you and get away with it that I can't understand anyone bothering to go to all this trouble. Obviously there's some deeper motive, something connected, perhaps, with the 100th floor.' Vansittart paused, watching Forbis carefully, then asked in a casual voice: 'Tell me, have you ever heard of anyone called Fowler?'

He said nothing when Forbis shook his head, but privately noted the reflex pause of unconscious recognition.

'All right?' Vansittart asked as they reached the bottom of the final stairway.

'Fine,' Forbis said quietly, catching his breath. He looked up at the rectangular opening above them, wondering how he would feel when he finally reached the roof-top. They had sneaked into the building by one of the service entrances at the rear, and then taken a freight elevator to the 80th floor.

'Let's go, then,' Vansittart walked on ahead, beckoning Forbis after him. Together they climbed up to the final doorway, and stepped out into the bright sunlight.

'Doctor . . . !' Forbis exclaimed happily. He felt fresh and exhilarated, his mind clear and unburdened at last. He gazed around the small flat roof, a thousand ideas tumbling past each other in his mind like the crystal fragments of a mountain stream. Somewhere below, however, a deeper current tugged at him.

Go up to the 100th floor and . . .

Around him lay the roof-tops of the city, and half a mile away, hidden by the haze, was the spire of the building he had tried to scale the previous day. He strolled about the roof, letting the cool air clear the sweat from his face. There were no suicide grilles around the balcony, but their absence caused him no anxiety.

Vansittart was watching him carefully, black valise in one hand. He nodded encouragingly, then gestured Forbis toward the balcony, eager to rest the valise on the ledge.

'Feel anything?'

'Nothing.' Forbis laughed, a brittle chuckle. 'It must have been one of those impractical jokes – "*Now let's see you get down.*" Can I look into the street?'

'Of course,' Vansittart agreed, bracing himself to seize Forbis if the little man attempted to jump. Beyond the balcony was a thousand-foot drop into a busy shopping thoroughfare.

Forbis clasped the near edge of the balcony in his palms and peered down at the lunch crowds below. Cars edged and shunted like coloured fleas, and people milled about aimlessly on the pavements. Nothing of any interest seemed to be happening.

Beside him, Vansittart frowned and glanced at his watch, wondering whether something had misfired. 'It's 12.30,' he said. 'We'll give up –'

He broke off as footsteps creaked on the stairway below. He swung around and watched the doorway, gesturing to Forbis to keep quiet.

As he turned his back the small man suddenly reached up and cut him sharply across the neck with the edge of his right hand, stunning him momentarily. When Vansittart staggered back he expertly chopped him on both sides of the throat, then sat him down and kicked him senseless with his knees.

Working swiftly, he ignored the broad shadow which reached across the roof to him from the doorway. He carefully fastened Vansittart's three jacket buttons, and then levered him up by the lapels on to his shoulder.

Backing against the balcony, he slid him on to the ledge, straightening his legs one after the other. Vansittart stirred helplessly, head lolling from side to side.

And . . . and . . .

Behind Forbis the shadow drew nearer, reaching up the side of the balcony, a broad neckless head between heavy shoulders.

Cutting off his pumping breath, Forbis reached out with both hands and pushed.

Ten seconds later, as horns sounded up dimly from the street below, he turned around.

'Good boy, Forbis.'

The big man's voice was flat but relaxed. Ten feet from Forbis, he watched him amiably. His face was plump and sallow, a callous mouth half-hidden by a brush moustache. He wore a bulky black overcoat, and one hand rested confidently in a deep pocket.

'Fowler!' Involuntarily, Forbis tried to move forward, for a moment attempting to reassemble his perspectives, but his feet had locked into the white surface of the roof.

Three hundred feet above, an airliner roared over. In a lucid interval provided by the noise, Forbis recognized Fowler, Vansittart's rival for the psychology professorship, remembered the long sessions of hypnosis after Fowler had picked him up in a bar three months earlier, offering to cure his chronic depression before it slid into alcoholism.

With a grasp, he remembered too the rest of the buried command. So Vansittart had been the real target, not himself! *Go up to the 100th floor and . . .* His first attempt at Vansittart had been a month earlier, when Fowler had left him on the roof and then pretended to be the janitor, but Vansittart had brought two others with him. The mysterious hidden command had been the bait to lure Vansittart to the roof again. Cunningly, Fowler had known that sooner or later Vansittart would yield to the temptation.

'And . . .' he said aloud.

Looking for Vansittart, in the absurd hope that he might have survived the thousand-foot fall, he started for the balcony, then tried to hold himself back as the current caught him.

'*And –?*' Fowler repeated pleasantly. His eyes, two festering points of light, made Forbis sway. 'There's still some more to come, isn't there, Forbis? You're beginning to remember it now.'

Mind draining, Forbis turned to the balcony, dry mouth sucking at the air.

'*And –?*' Fowler snapped, his voice harder.

. . . And . . . and . . .

Numbly, Forbis jumped up on to the balcony, and poised on the narrow ledge like a diver, the streets swaying before his eyes. Below, the horns were silent again and the traffic had resumed its flow, a knot of vehicles

drawn up in the centre of a small crowd by the edge of the pavement. For a few moments he managed to resist, and then the current caught him, toppling him like a drifting spar.

Fowler stepped quietly through the doorway. Ten seconds later, the horns sounded again.

1962

THE SUBLIMINAL MAN

'The signs, Doctor! Have you seen the signs?'

Frowning with annoyance, Dr Franklin quickened his pace and hurried down the hospital steps towards the line of parked cars. Over his shoulder he caught a glimpse of a young man in ragged sandals and paint-stained jeans waving to him from the far side of the drive.

'Dr Franklin! The signs!'

Head down, Franklin swerved around an elderly couple approaching the out-patients department. His car was over a hundred yards away. Too tired to start running himself, he waited for the young man to catch him up.

'All right, Hathaway, what is it this time?' he snapped. 'I'm sick of you hanging around here all day.'

Hathaway lurched to a halt in front of him, uncut black hair like an awning over his eyes. He brushed it back with a claw-like hand and turned on a wild smile, obviously glad to see Franklin and oblivious of the latter's hostility.

'I've been trying to reach you at night, Doctor, but your wife always puts the phone down on me,' he explained without a hint of rancour, as if well-used to this kind of snub. 'And I didn't want to look for you inside the Clinic.' They were standing by a privet hedge that shielded them from the lower windows of the main administrative block, but Franklin's regular rendezvous with Hathaway and his strange messianic cries had already become the subject of amused comment.

Franklin began to say: 'I appreciate that –' but Hathaway brushed this aside. 'Forget it, Doctor, there are more important things now. They've started to build the first big signs! Over a hundred feet high, on the traffic islands outside town. They'll soon have all the approach roads covered. When they do we might as well stop thinking.'

'Your trouble is that you're thinking too much,' Franklin told him. 'You've been rambling about these signs for weeks now. Tell me, have you actually seen one signalling?'

Hathaway tore a handful of leaves from the hedge, exasperated by this irrelevancy. 'Of course I haven't, that's the whole point, Doctor.' He dropped his voice as a group of nurses walked past, watching his raffish figure out of the corners of their eyes. 'The construction gangs were out again last night, laying huge power cables. You'll see them on the way home. Everything's nearly ready now.'

'They're traffic signs,' Franklin explained patiently. 'The flyover has just been completed. Hathaway, for God's sake, relax. Try to think of Dora and the child.'

'I *am* thinking of them!' Hathaway's voice rose to a controlled scream. 'Those cables were 40,000-volt lines, Doctor, with terrific switch-gear. The trucks were loaded with enormous metal scaffolds. Tomorrow they'll start lifting them up all over the city, they'll block off half the sky! What do you think Dora will be like after six months of that? We've got to stop them, Doctor, they're trying to transistorize our brains!'

Embarrassed by Hathaway's high-pitched shouting, Franklin had momentarily lost his sense of direction. Helplessly he searched the sea of cars for his own. 'Hathaway, I can't waste any more time talking to you. Believe me, you need skilled help, these obsessions are beginning to master you.'

Hathaway started to protest, and Franklin raised his right hand firmly. 'Listen. For the last time, if you can show me one of these signs, and prove it's transmitting subliminal commands, I'll go to the police with you. But you haven't got a shred of evidence, and you know it. Subliminal advertising was banned thirty years ago, and the laws have never been repealed. Anyway, the technique was unsatisfactory, any success it had was marginal. Your idea of a huge conspiracy with all these thousands of giant signs everywhere is preposterous.'

'All right, Doctor.' Hathaway leaned against the bonnet of one of the cars. His mood seemed to switch abruptly from one level to the next. He watched Franklin amiably. 'What's the matter – lost your car?'

'All your damned shouting has confused me.' Franklin pulled out his ignition key and read the number off the tag: 'NYN 299-566-367-21 – can you see it?'

Hathaway leaned around lazily, one sandal up on the bonnet, surveying the square of a thousand or so cars facing them. 'Difficult, isn't it, when they're all identical, even the same colour? Thirty years ago there were about ten different makes, each in a dozen colours.'

Franklin spotted his car and began to walk towards it. 'Sixty years ago there were a hundred makes. What of it? The economies of standardization are obviously bought at a price.'

Hathaway drummed his palm on the roofs. 'But these cars aren't all that cheap, Doctor. In fact, comparing them on an average income basis with those of thirty years ago they're about forty per cent more expensive. With only one make being produced you'd expect a substantial reduction in price, not an increase.'

'Maybe,' Franklin said, opening his door. 'But mechanically the cars of today are far more sophisticated. They're lighter, more durable, safer to drive.'

Hathaway shook his head sceptically. 'They *bore* me. The same model, same styling, same colour, year after year. It's a sort of communism.' He rubbed a greasy finger over the windshield. 'This is a new one

again, isn't it, Doctor? Where's the old one – you only had it for three months?'

'I traded it in,' Franklin told him, starting the engine. 'If you ever had any money you'd realize that it's the most economical way of owning a car. You don't keep driving the same one until it falls apart. It's the same with everything else – television sets, washing machines, refrigerators. But you aren't faced with the problem.'

Hathaway ignored the gibe, and leaned his elbow on Franklin's window. 'Not a bad idea, either, Doctor. It gives me time to think. I'm not working a twelve-hour day to pay for a lot of things I'm too busy to use before they're obsolete.'

He waved as Franklin reversed the car out of its line, then shouted into the wake of exhaust: 'Drive with your eyes closed, Doctor!'

On the way home Franklin kept carefully to the slowest of the four-speed lanes. As usual after his discussions with Hathaway, he felt vaguely depressed. He realized that unconsciously he envied Hathaway his foot-loose existence. Despite the grimy cold-water apartment in the shadow and roar of the flyover, despite his nagging wife and their sick child, and the endless altercations with the landlord and the supermarket credit manager, Hathaway still retained his freedom intact. Spared any responsibilities, he could resist the smallest encroachment upon him by the rest of society, if only by generating obsessive fantasies such as his latest one about subliminal advertising.

The ability to react to stimuli, even irrationally, was a valid criterion of freedom. By contrast, what freedom Franklin possessed was peripheral, sharply demarked by the manifold responsibilities in the centre of his life – the three mortgages on his home, the mandatory rounds of cocktail parties, the private consultancy occupying most of Saturday which paid the instalments on the multitude of household gadgets, clothes and past holidays. About the only time he had to himself was driving to and from work.

But at least the roads were magnificent. Whatever other criticisms might be levelled at the present society, it certainly knew how to build roads. Eight-, ten- and twelve-lane expressways interlaced across the country, plunging from overhead causeways into the giant car parks in the centre of the cities, or dividing into the great suburban arteries with their multi-acre parking aprons around the marketing centres. Together the roadways and car parks covered more than a third of the country's entire area, and in the neighbourhood of the cities the proportion was higher. The old cities were surrounded by the vast motion sculptures of the clover-leaves and flyovers, but even so the congestion was unremitting.

The ten-mile journey to his home in fact covered over twenty-five miles and took him twice as long as it had done before the construction of the expressway, the additional miles contained within the three giant clover-leaves. New cities were springing from the motels, cafés and car

marts around the highways. At the slightest hint of an intersection a shanty town of shacks and filling stations sprawled away among the forest of electric signs and route indicators.

All around him cars bulleted along, streaming towards the suburbs. Relaxed by the smooth motion of the car, Franklin edged outwards into the next speed-lane. As he accelerated from 40 to 50 m.p.h. a strident ear-jarring noise drummed out from his tyres, shaking the chassis of the car. Ostensibly an aid to lane discipline, the surface of the road was covered with a mesh of small rubber studs, spaced progressively farther apart in each of the lanes so that the tyre hum resonated exactly on 40, 50, 60 and 70 m.p.h. Driving at an intermediate speed for more than a few seconds became nervously exhausting, and soon resulted in damage to the car and tyres.

When the studs wore out they were replaced by slightly different patterns, matching those on the latest tyres, so that regular tyre changes were necessary, increasing the safety and efficiency of the expressway. It also increased the revenues of the car and tyre manufacturers. Most cars over six months old soon fell to pieces under the steady battering, but this was regarded as a desirable end, the greater turnover reducing the unit price and making more frequent model changes, as well as ridding the roads of dangerous vehicles.

A quarter of a mile ahead, at the approach to the first of the clover-leaves, the traffic stream was slowing, huge police signs signalling 'Lanes Closed Ahead' and 'Drop Speed by 10 m.p.h.'. Franklin tried to return to the previous lane, but the cars were jammed bumper to bumper. As the chassis began to shudder and vibrate, jarring his spine, he clamped his teeth and tried to restrain himself from sounding the horn. Other drivers were less self-controlled and everywhere engines were plunging and snarling, horns blaring. Road taxes were now so high, up to thirty per cent of the gross national product (by contrast, income taxes were a bare two per cent) that any delay on the expressways called for an immediate government inquiry, and the major departments of state were concerned with the administration of the road systems.

Nearer the clover-leaf the lanes had been closed to allow a gang of construction workers to erect a massive metal sign on one of the traffic islands. The palisaded area swarmed with engineers and surveyors, and Franklin assumed that this was the sign Hathaway had seen unloaded the previous night. His apartment was in one of the gimcrack buildings in the settlement that straggled away around a near-by flyover, a low-rent area inhabited by service-station personnel, waitresses and other migrant labour.

The sign was enormous, at least a hundred feet high, fitted with heavy concave grilles similar to radar bowls. Rooted in a series of concrete caissons, it reared high into the air above the approach roads, visible for miles. Franklin craned up at the grilles, tracing the power cables from the transformers up into the intricate mesh of metal coils that covered their surface. A line of red aircraft-warning beacons was already alight along

the top strut, and Franklin assumed that the sign was part of the ground approach system of the city airport ten miles to the east.

Three minutes later, as he accelerated down the two-mile link of straight highway to the next clover-leaf, he saw the second of the giant signs looming up into the sky before him.

Changing down into the 40 m.p.h. lane, Franklin watched the great bulk of the second sign recede in his rear-view mirror. Although there were no graphic symbols among the wire coils covering the grilles, Hathaway's warnings still sounded in his ears. Without knowing why, he felt sure that the signs were not part of the airport approach system. Neither of them was in line with the principal air-lines. To justify the expense of siting them in the centre of the expressway – the second sign required elaborate angled buttresses to support it on the narrow island – obviously meant that their role related in some way to the traffic streams.

Two hundred yards away was a roadside auto-mart, and Franklin abruptly remembered that he needed some cigarettes. Swinging the car down the entrance ramp, he joined the queue passing the self-service dispenser at the far end of the rank. The auto-mart was packed with cars, each of the five purchasing ranks lined with tired-looking men hunched over their wheels.

Inserting his coins (paper money was no longer in circulation, unmanageable by the automats) he took a carton from the dispenser. This was the only brand of cigarettes available – in fact there was only one brand of everything – though giant economy packs were an alternative. Moving off, he opened the dashboard locker.

Inside, still sealed in their wrappers, were three other cartons.

A strong fish-like smell pervaded the house when he reached home, steaming out from the oven in the kitchen. Sniffing it uneagerly, Franklin took off his coat and hat. His wife was crouched over the TV set in the lounge. An announcer was dictating a stream of numbers, and Judith scribbled them down on a pad, occasionally cursing under her breath. 'What a muddle!' she snapped. 'He was talking so quickly I took only a few things down.'

'Probably deliberate,' Franklin commented. 'A new panel game?'

Judith kissed him on the cheek, discreetly hiding the ashtray loaded with cigarette butts and chocolate wrappings. 'Hello, darling, sorry not to have a drink ready for you. They've started this series of Spot Bargains, they give you a selection of things on which you get a ninety per cent trade-in discount at the local stores, if you're in the right area and have the right serial numbers. It's all terribly complicated.'

'Sounds good, though. What have you got?'

Judith peered at her checklist. 'Well, as far as I can see the only thing is the infra-red barbecue spit. But we have to be there before eight o'clock tonight. It's seven thirty already.'

'Then that's out. I'm tired, angel, I need something to eat.' When Judith

started to protest he added firmly: 'Look, I don't want a new infra-red barbecue spit, we've only had this one for two months. Damn it, it's not even a different model.'

'But, darling, don't you see, it makes it cheaper if you keep buying new ones. We'll have to trade ours in at the end of the year anyway, we signed the contract, and this way we save at least five pounds. These Spot Bargains aren't just a gimmick, you know. I've been glued to that set all day.' A note of irritation had crept into her voice, but Franklin stood his ground, doggedly ignoring the clock.

'Right, we lose five pounds. It's worth it.' Before she could remonstrate he said: 'Judith, please, you probably took the wrong number down anyway.' As she shrugged and went over to the bar he called: 'Make it a stiff one. I see we have health foods on the menu.'

'They're good for you, darling. You know you can't live on ordinary foods all the time. They don't contain any proteins or vitamins. You're always saying we ought to be like people in the old days and eat nothing but health foods.'

'I would, but they smell so awful.' Franklin lay back, nose in the glass of whisky, gazing at the darkened skyline outside.

A quarter of a mile away, gleaming out above the roof of the neighbourhood supermarket, were the five red beacon lights. Now and then, as the headlamps of the Spot Bargainers swung up across the face of the building, he could see the massive bulk of the sign clearly silhouetted against the evening sky.

'Judith!' He went into the kitchen and took her over to the window. 'That sign, just behind the supermarket. When did they put it up?'

'I don't know.' Judith peered at him. 'Why are you so worried, Robert? Isn't it something to do with the airport?'

Franklin stared at the dark hull of the sign. 'So everyone probably thinks.'

Carefully he poured his whisky into the sink.

After parking his car on the supermarket apron at seven o'clock the next morning, Franklin carefully emptied his pockets and stacked the coins in the dashboard locker. The supermarket was already busy with early morning shoppers and the line of thirty turnstiles clicked and slammed. Since the introduction of the '24-hour spending day' the shopping complex was never closed. The bulk of the shoppers were discount buyers, housewives contracted to make huge volume purchases of food, clothing and appliances against substantial overall price cuts, and forced to drive around all day from supermarket to supermarket, frantically trying to keep pace with their purchase schedules and grappling with the added incentives inserted to keep the schemes alive.

Many of the women had teamed up, and as Franklin walked over to the entrance a pack of them charged towards their cars, stuffing their pay

slips into their bags and shouting at each other. A moment later their cars roared off in a convoy to the next marketing zone.

A large neon sign over the entrance listed the latest discount – a mere five per cent – calculated on the volume of turnover. The highest discounts, sometimes up to twenty-five per cent, were earned in the housing estates where junior white-collar workers lived. There, spending had a strong social incentive, and the desire to be the highest spender in the neighbourhood was given moral reinforcement by the system of listing all the names and their accumulating cash totals on a huge electric sign in the supermarket foyers. The higher the spender, the greater his contribution to the discounts enjoyed by others. The lowest spenders were regarded as social criminals, free-riding on the backs of others.

Luckily this system had yet to be adopted in Franklin's neighbourhood – not because the Professional men and their wives were able to exercise more discretion, but because their higher incomes allowed them to contract into more expensive discount schemes operated by the big department stores in the city.

Ten yards from the entrance Franklin paused, looking up at the huge metal sign mounted in an enclosure at the edge of the car park. Unlike the other signs and hoardings that proliferated everywhere, no attempt had been made to decorate it, or disguise the gaunt bare rectangle of riveted steel mesh. Power lines wound down its sides, and the concrete surface of the car park was crossed by a long scar where a cable had been sunk.

Franklin strolled along. Fifty feet from the sign he stopped and turned, realizing that he would be late for the hospital and needed a new carton of cigarettes. A dim but powerful humming emanated from the transformers below the sign, fading as he retraced his steps to the supermarket.

Going over to the automats in the foyer, he felt for his change, then whistled sharply when he remembered why he had deliberately emptied his pockets.

'Hathaway!' he said, loudly enough for two shoppers to stare at him. Reluctant to look directly at the sign, he watched its reflection in one of the glass door-panes, so that any subliminal message would be reversed.

Almost certainly he had received two distinct signals – 'Keep Away' and 'Buy Cigarettes'. The people who normally parked their cars along the perimeter of the apron were avoiding the area under the enclosure, the cars describing a loose semi-circle fifty feet around it.

He turned to the janitor sweeping out the foyer. 'What's that sign for?'

The man leaned on his broom, gazing dully at the sign. 'No idea,' he said. 'Must be something to do with the airport.' He had a fresh cigarette in his mouth, but his right hand reached to his hip pocket and pulled out a pack. He drummed the second cigarette absently on his thumbnail as Franklin walked away.

Everyone entering the supermarket was buying cigarettes.

* * *

Cruising quietly along the 40 m.p.h. lane, Franklin began to take a closer interest in the landscape around him. Usually he was either too tired or too preoccupied to do more than think about his driving, but now he examined the expressway methodically, scanning the roadside cafés for any smaller versions of the new signs. A host of neon displays covered the doorways and windows, but most of them seemed innocuous, and he turned his attention to the larger billboards erected along the open stretches of the expressway. Many of these were as high as four-storey houses, elaborate three-dimensional devices in which giant housewives with electric eyes and teeth jerked and postured around their ideal kitchens, neon flashes exploding from their smiles.

The areas on either side of the expressway were wasteland, continuous junkyards filled with cars and trucks, washing machines and refrigerators, all perfectly workable but jettisoned by the economic pressure of the succeeding waves of discount models. Their intact chrome hardly tarnished, the metal shells and cabinets glittered in the sunlight. Nearer the city the billboards were sufficiently close together to hide them but now and then, as he slowed to approach one of the flyovers, Franklin caught a glimpse of the huge pyramids of metal, gleaming silently like the refuse grounds of some forgotten El Dorado.

That evening Hathaway was waiting for him as he came down the hospital steps. Franklin waved him across the court, then led the way quickly to his car.

'What's the matter, Doctor?' Hathaway asked as Franklin wound up the windows and glanced around the lines of parked cars. 'Is someone after you?'

Franklin laughed sombrely. 'I don't know. I hope not, but if what you say is right, I suppose there is.'

Hathaway leaned back with a chuckle, propping one knee up on the dashboard. 'So you've seen something, Doctor, after all.'

'Well, I'm not sure yet, but there's just a chance you may be right. This morning at the Fairlawne supermarket . . .' He broke off, uneasily remembering the huge black sign and the abrupt way in which he had turned back to the supermarket as he approached it, then described his encounter.

Hathaway nodded. 'I've seen the sign there. It's big, but not as big as some that are going up. They're building them everywhere now. All over the city. What are you going to do, Doctor?'

Franklin gripped the wheel tightly. Hathaway's thinly veiled amusement irritated him. 'Nothing, of course. Damn it, it may be just auto-suggestion, you've probably got me imagining –'

Hathaway sat up with a jerk. 'Don't be absurd, Doctor! If you can't believe your own senses what chance have you left? They're invading your brain, if you don't defend yourself they'll take it over completely! We've got to act now, before we're all paralysed.'

Wearily Franklin raised one hand to restrain him. 'Just a minute. Assuming that these signs *are* going up everywhere, what would be their object? Apart from wasting the enormous amount of capital invested in all the other millions of signs and billboards, the amounts of discretionary spending power still available must be infinitesimal. Some of the present mortgage and discount schemes reach half a century ahead. A big trade war would be disastrous.'

'Quite right, Doctor,' Hathaway rejoined evenly, 'but you're forgetting one thing. What would supply that extra spending power? A big increase in production. Already they've started to raise the working day from twelve hours to fourteen. In some of the appliance plants around the city Sunday working is being introduced as a norm. Can you visualize it, Doctor – a seven-day week, everyone with at least three jobs.'

Franklin shook his head. 'People won't stand for it.'

'They will. Within the last twenty-five years the gross national product has risen by fifty per cent, but so have the average hours worked. Ultimately we'll all be working and spending twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. No one will dare refuse. Think what a slump would mean – millions of lay-offs, people with time on their hands and nothing to spend it on. Real leisure, not just time spent buying things,' He seized Franklin by the shoulder. 'Well, Doctor, are you going to join me?'

Franklin freed himself. Half a mile away, partly hidden by the four-storey bulk of the Pathology Department, was the upper half of one of the giant signs, workmen still crawling across its girders. The airlines over the city had deliberately been routed away from the hospital, and the sign obviously had no connection with approaching aircraft.

'Isn't there a prohibition on – what did they call it – subliminal living? How can the unions accept it?'

'The fear of a slump. You know the new economic dogmas. Unless output rises by a steady inflationary five per cent the economy is stagnating. Ten years ago increased efficiency alone would raise output, but the advantages there are minimal now and only one thing is left. More work. Subliminal advertising will provide the spur.'

'What are you planning to do?'

'I can't tell you, Doctor, unless you accept equal responsibility for it.'

'That sounds rather Quixotic,' Franklin commented. 'Tilting at windmills. You won't be able to chop those things down with an axe.'

'I won't try.' Hathaway opened the door. 'Don't wait too long to make up your mind, Doctor. By then it may not be yours to make up.' With a wave he was gone.

On the way home Franklin's scepticism returned. The idea of the conspiracy was preposterous, and the economic arguments were too plausible. As usual, though, there had been a hook in the soft bait Hathaway dangled before him – Sunday working. His own consultancy had been extended into Sunday morning with his appointment as visiting factory doctor to

one of the automobile plants that had started Sunday shifts. But instead of resenting this incursion into his already meagre hours of leisure he had been glad. For one frightening reason – he needed the extra income.

Looking out over the lines of scurrying cars, he noticed that at least a dozen of the great signs had been erected along the expressway. As Hathaway had said, more were going up everywhere, rearing over the supermarkets in the housing developments like rusty metal sails.

Judith was in the kitchen when he reached home, watching the TV programme on the hand-set over the cooker. Franklin climbed past a big cardboard carton, its seals still unbroken, which blocked the doorway, kissed her on the cheek as she scribbled numbers down on her pad. The pleasant odour of pot-roast chicken – or, rather a gelatine dummy of a chicken fully flavoured and free of any toxic or nutritional properties – mollified his irritation at finding her still playing the Spot Bargains.

He tapped the carton with his foot. 'What's this?'

'No idea, darling, something's always coming these days, I can't keep up with it all.' She peered through the glass door at the chicken – an economy twelve-pounder, the size of a turkey, with stylized legs and wings and an enormous breast, most of which would be discarded at the end of the meal (there were no dogs or cats these days, the crumbs from the rich man's table saw to that) – and then glanced at him pointedly.

'You look rather worried, Robert. Bad day?'

Franklin murmured noncommittally. The hours spent trying to detect false clues in the faces of the Spot Bargain announcers had sharpened Judith's perceptions. He felt a pang of sympathy for the legion of husbands similarly outmatched.

'Have you been talking to that crazy beatnik again?'

'Hathaway? As a matter of fact I have. He's not all that crazy.' He stepped backwards into the carton, almost spilling his drink. 'Well, what is this thing? As I'll be working for the next fifty Sundays to pay for it I'd like to find out.'

He searched the sides, finally located the label. '*A TV set*? Judith, do we need another one? We've already got three. Lounge, dining-room and the hand-set. What's the fourth for?'

'The guest-room, dear, don't get so excited. We can't leave a hand-set in the guest-room, it's rude. I'm trying to economize, but four TV sets is the bare minimum. All the magazines say so.'

'*And* three radios?' Franklin stared irritably at the carton. 'If we do invite a guest here how much time is he going to spend alone in his room watching television? Judith, we've got to call a halt. It's not as if these things were free, or even cheap. Anyway, television is a total waste of time. There's only one programme. It's ridiculous to have four sets.'

'Robert, there are *four* channels.'

'But only the commercials are different.' Before Judith could reply the telephone rang. Franklin lifted the kitchen receiver, listened to the gabble of noise that poured from it. At first he wondered whether this

was some offbeat prestige commercial, then realized it was Hathaway in a manic swing.

'Hathaway!' he shouted back. 'Relax, for God's sake! What's the matter now?'

'– Doctor, you'll have to believe me this time. I climbed on to one of the islands with a stroboscope, they've got hundreds of high-speed shutters blasting away like machine-guns straight into people's faces and they can't see a thing, it's fantastic! The next big campaign's going to be cars and TV sets, they're trying to swing a two-month model change – can you imagine it, Doctor, a new car every two months? God Almighty, it's just –'

Franklin waited impatiently as the five-second commercial break cut in (all telephone calls were free, the length of the commercial extending with range – for long-distance calls the ratio of commercial to conversation was as high as 10:1, the participants desperately trying to get a word in edgeways between the interminable interruptions), but just before it ended he abruptly put the telephone down, then removed the receiver from the cradle.

Judith came over and took his arm. 'Robert, what's the matter? You look terribly strained.'

Franklin picked up his drink and walked through into the lounge. 'It's just Hathaway. As you say, I'm getting a little too involved with him. He's starting to prey on my mind.'

He looked at the dark outline of the sign over the supermarket, its red warning lights glowing in the night sky. Blank and nameless, like an area for ever closed-off in an insane mind, what frightened him was its total anonymity.

'Yet I'm not sure,' he muttered. 'So much of what Hathaway says makes sense. These subliminal techniques are the sort of last-ditch attempt you'd expect from an over-capitalized industrial system.'

He waited for Judith to reply, then looked up at her. She stood in the centre of the carpet, hands folded limply, her sharp, intelligent face curiously dull and blunted. He followed her gaze out over the rooftops, then with an effort turned his head and quickly switched on the TV set.

'Come on,' he said grimly. 'Let's watch television. God, we're going to need that fourth set.'

A week later Franklin began to compile his inventory. He saw nothing more of Hathaway; as he left the hospital in the evening the familiar scruffy figure was absent. When the first of the explosions sounded dimly around the city and he read of the attempts to sabotage the giant signs he automatically assumed that Hathaway was responsible, but later he heard on a newscast that the detonations had been set off by construction workers excavating foundations.

More of the signs appeared over the rooftops, isolated on the palisaded islands near the suburban shopping centres. Already there were over thirty

on the ten-mile route from the hospital, standing shoulder to shoulder over the speeding cars like giant dominoes. Franklin had given up his attempt to avoid looking at them, but the slim possibility that the explosions might be Hathaway's counter-attack kept his suspicions alive.

He began his inventory after hearing the newscast, and discovered that in the previous fortnight he and Judith had traded in their

Car (previous model 2 months old)
2 TV sets (4 months)
Power mower (7 months)
Electric cooker (5 months)
Hair dryer (4 months)
Refrigerator (3 months)
2 radios (7 months)
Record player (5 months)
Cocktail bar (8 months)

Half these purchases had been made by himself, but exactly when he could never recall realizing at the time. The car, for example, he had left in the garage near the hospital to be greased, that evening had signed for the new model as he sat at its wheel, accepting the saleman's assurance that the depreciation on the two-month trade-in was virtually less than the cost of the grease-job. Ten minutes later, as he sped along the expressway, he suddenly realized that he had bought a new car. Similarly, the TV sets had been replaced by identical models after developing the same irritating interference pattern (curiously, the new sets also displayed the pattern, but as the salesman assured them, this promptly vanished two days later). Not once had he actually decided of his own volition that he wanted something and then gone out to a store and bought it!

He carried the inventory around with him, adding to it as necessary, quietly and without protest analysing these new sales techniques, wondering whether total capitulation might be the only way of defeating them. As long as he kept up even a token resistance, the inflationary growth curve would show a controlled annual ten per cent climb. With that resistance removed, however, it would begin to rocket upwards out of control . . .

Driving home from the hospital two months later, he saw one of the signs for the first time.

He was in the 40 m.p.h. lane, unable to keep up with the flood of new cars, and had just passed the second of the three clover-leaves when the traffic half a mile away began to slow down. Hundreds of cars had driven up on to the grass verge, and a crowd was gathering around one of the signs. Two small black figures were climbing up the metal face, and a series of grid-like patterns of light flashed on and off, illuminating the evening air. The patterns were random and broken, as if the sign was being tested for the first time.

Relieved that Hathaway's suspicions had been completely groundless, Franklin turned off on to the soft shoulder, then walked forward through the spectators as the lights stuttered in their faces. Below, behind the steel palisades around the island, was a large group of police and engineers, craning up at the men scaling the sign a hundred feet over their heads.

Suddenly Franklin stopped, the sense of relief fading instantly. Several of the police on the ground were armed with shotguns, and the two policemen climbing the sign carried submachine-guns slung over their shoulders. They were converging on a third figure, crouched by a switch-box on the penultimate tier, a bearded man in a grimy shirt, a bare knee poking through his jeans.

Hathaway!

Franklin hurried towards the island, the sign hissing and spluttering, fuses blowing by the dozen.

Then the flicker of lights cleared and steadied, blazing out continuously, and together the crowd looked up at the decks of brilliant letters. The phrases, and every combination of them possible, were entirely familiar, and Franklin knew that he had been reading them for weeks as he passed up and down the expressway.

BUY NOW BUY NOW BUY NOW BUY NOW BUY
NEW CAR NOW NEW CAR NOW NEW CAR NOW
YES YES YES YES YES YES YES YES YES YES

Sirens blaring, two patrol cars swung on to the verge through the crowd and plunged across the damp grass. Police spilled from their doors, batons in their hands, and quickly began to force back the crowd. Franklin held his ground as they approached, started to say: 'Officer, I know the man –' but the policeman punched him in the chest with the flat of his hand. Winded, he stumbled back among the cars, and leaned helplessly against a fender as the police began to break the windshields, the hapless drivers protesting angrily, those farther back rushing for their vehicles.

The noise fell away when one of the submachine-guns fired a brief roaring burst, then rose in a massive gasp as Hathaway, arms outstretched, let out a cry of triumph and pain, and jumped.

'But, Robert, what does it really matter?' Judith asked as Franklin sat inertly in the lounge the next morning. 'I know it's tragic for his wife and daughter, but Hathaway was in the grip of an obsession. If he hated advertising signs so much why didn't he dynamite those we *can* see, instead of worrying so much about those we can't?'

Franklin stared at the TV screen, hoping the programme would distract him.

'Hathaway was *right*,' he said.

'Was he? Advertising is here to stay. We've no real freedom of choice,

anyway. We can't spend more than we can afford, the finance companies soon clamp down.'

'Do you accept that?' Franklin went over to the window. A quarter of a mile away, in the centre of the estate, another of the signs was being erected. It was due east from them, and in the early morning light the shadows of its rectangular superstructure fell across the garden, reaching almost to the steps of the french windows at his feet. As a concession to the neighbourhood, and perhaps to allay any suspicions while it was being erected by an appeal to petty snobbery, the lower sections had been encased in mock-Tudor panelling.

Franklin stared at it, counting the half-dozen police lounging by their patrol cars as the construction gang unloaded the prefabricated grilles from a truck. He looked at the sign by the supermarket, trying to repress his memories of Hathaway and the pathetic attempts the man had made to convince Franklin and gain his help.

He was still standing there an hour later when Judith came in, putting on her hat and coat, ready to visit the supermarket.

Franklin followed her to the door. 'I'll drive you down there, Judith. I have to see about booking a new car. The next models are coming out at the end of the month. With luck we'll get one of the early deliveries.'

They walked out into the trim drive, the shadows of the signs swinging across the quiet neighbourhood as the day progressed, sweeping over the heads of the people on their way to the supermarket like the blades of enormous scythes.

1963

THE REPTILE ENCLOSURE

'They remind me of the Gadarene swine,' Mildred Pelham remarked.

Interrupting his scrutiny of the crowded beach below the cafeteria terrace, Roger Pelham glanced at his wife. 'Why do you say that?'

Mildred continued to read for a few moments, and then lowered her book. 'Well, don't they?' she asked rhetorically. 'They look like pigs.'

Pelham smiled weakly at this mild but characteristic display of misanthropy. He peered down at his own white knees protruding from his shorts and at his wife's plump arms and shoulders. 'I suppose we all do,' he temporized. However, there was little chance of Mildred's remark being overheard and resented. They were sitting at a corner table, with their backs to the hundreds of ice-cream eaters and cola-drinkers crammed elbow to elbow on the terrace. The dull hubbub of voices was overlaid by the endless commentaries broadcast over the transistor radios propped among the bottles, and by the distant sounds of the fairground behind the dunes.

A short drop below the terrace was the beach, covered by a mass of reclining figures which stretched from the water's edge up to the roadway behind the cafeteria and then away over the dunes. Not a single grain of sand was visible. Even at the tide-line, where a little slack water swilled weakly at a debris of old cigarette packets and other trash, a huddle of small children clung to the skirt of the beach, hiding the grey sand.

Gazing down at the beach again, Pelham realized that his wife's ungenerous judgment was no more than the truth. Everywhere bare haunches and shoulders jutted into the air, limbs lay in serpentine coils. Despite the sunlight and the considerable period of time they had spent on the beach, many of the people were still white-skinned, or at most a boiled pink, restlessly shifting in their little holes in a hopeless attempt to be comfortable.

Usually this spectacle of jostling, over-exposed flesh, with its unsavoury bouquet of stale suntan lotion and sweat – looking along the beach as it swept out to the distant cape, Pelham could almost see the festering corona, sustained in the air by the babble of ten thousand transistor radios, reverberating like a swarm of flies – would have sent him hurtling along the first inland highway at seventy miles an hour. But for some reason Pelham's usual private distaste for the general public had evaporated. He felt strangely exhilarated by the presence of so many people (he had

calculated that he could see over 50 thousand along the five-mile stretch of beach) and found himself unable to leave the terrace, although it was now 3 o'clock and neither he nor Mildred had eaten since breakfast. Once their corner seats were surrendered they would never regain them.

To himself he mused: 'The ice-cream eaters on Echo beach . . .' He played with the empty glass in front of him. Shreds of synthetic orange pulp clung to the sides, and a fly buzzed half-heartedly from one to another. The sea was flat and calm, an opaque grey disc, but a mile away a low surface mist lay over the water like vapour on a vat.

'You look hot, Roger. Why don't you go in for a swim?'

'I may. You know, it's a curious thing, but of all the people here, not one is swimming.'

Mildred nodded in a bored way. A large passive woman, she seemed content merely to sit in the sunlight and read. Yet it was she who had first suggested that they drive out to the coast, and for once had suppressed her usual grumbles when they ran into the first heavy traffic jams and were forced to abandon the car and complete the remaining two miles on foot. Pelham had not seen her walk like that for ten years.

'It is rather strange,' she said. 'But it's not particularly warm.'

'I don't agree.' Pelham was about to continue when he suddenly stood up and looked over the rail at the beach. Halfway down the slope, parallel with the promenade, a continuous stream of people moved slowly along an informal right-of-way, shouldering past each other with fresh bottles of cola, lotion and ice-cream.

'Roger, what's the matter?'

'Nothing . . . I thought I saw Sherrington.' Pelham searched the beach, the moment of recognition lost.

'You're always seeing Sherrington. That's the fourth time alone this afternoon. Do stop worrying.'

'I'm not worrying. I can't be certain, but I felt I saw him then.'

Reluctantly, Pelham sat down, edging his chair fractionally closer to the rail. Depite his mood of lethargy and vacuous boredom, an indefinable but distinct feeling of restlessness had preoccupied him all day. In some way associated with Sherrington's presence on the beach, this uneasiness had been increasing steadily. The chances of Sherrington – with whom he shared an office in the Physiology Department at the University – actually choosing this section of the beach were remote, and Pelham was not even sure why he was so convinced that Sherrington was there at all. Perhaps these illusory glimpses – all the more unlikely in view of Sherrington's black beard and high severe face, his stooped long-legged walk – were simply projections of this underlying tension and his own peculiar dependence upon Sherrington.

However, this sense of uneasiness was not confined to himself. Although Mildred seemed immune, most of the people on the beach appeared to share this mood with Pelham. As the day progressed the continuous hubbub gave way to more sporadic chatter. Occasionally the noise would

fall away altogether, and the great concourse, like an immense crowd waiting for the long-delayed start of some public spectacle, would sit up and stir impatiently. To Pelham, watching carefully from his vantage point over the beach, these ripples of restless activity, as everyone swayed forward in long undulations, were plainly indicated by the metallic glimmer of the thousands of portable radios moving in an oscillating wave. Each successive spasm, recurring at roughly half-hour intervals, seemed to take the crowd slightly nearer the sea.

Directly below the concrete edge of the terrace, among the mass of reclining figures, a large family group had formed a private enclosure. To one side of this, literally within reach of Pelham, the adolescent members of the family had dug their own nest, their sprawling angular bodies, in their damp abbreviated swimming suits, entwined in and out of each other like some curious annular animal. Well within earshot, despite the continuous background of noise from the beach and the distant fair-grounds, Pelham listened to their inane talk, following the thread of the radio commentaries as they switched aimlessly from one station to the next.

'They're about to launch another satellite,' he told Mildred. '*Echo XXII.*'

'Why do they bother?' Mildred's flat blue eyes surveyed the distant haze over the water. 'I should have thought there were more than enough of them flying about already.'

'Well . . .' For a moment Pelham debated whether to pursue the meagre conversational possibilities of his wife's reply. Although she was married to a lecturer in the School of Physiology, her interest in scientific matters was limited to little more than a blanket condemnation of the entire sphere of activity. His own post at the University she regarded with painful tolerance, despising the untidy office, scruffy students and meaningless laboratory equipment. Pelham had never been able to discover exactly what calling she would have respected. Before their marriage she maintained what he later realized was a polite silence on the subject of his work; after eleven years this attitude had barely changed, although the exigencies of living on his meagre salary had forced her to take an interest in the subtle, complex and infinitely wearying game of promotional snakes and ladders.

As expected, her acerbic tongue had made them few friends, but by a curious paradox Pelham felt that he had benefited from the grudging respect this had brought her. Sometimes her waspish comments, delivered at the overlong sherry parties, always in a loud voice during some conversational silence (for example, she had described the elderly occupant of the Physiology chair as 'that gerontological freak' within some five feet of the Professor's wife) delighted Pelham by their mordant accuracy, but in general there was something frightening about her pitiless lack of sympathy for the rest of the human race. Her large bland face, with its prim, rosebud mouth, reminded Pelham of the description of the Mona

Lisa as looking as if she had just dined off her husband. Mildred, however, did not even smile.

'Sherrington has a rather interesting theory about the satellites,' Pelham told her. 'I'd hoped we might see him so that he could explain it again. I think you'd be amused to hear it, Mildred. He's working on IRM's at present –'

'On what?' The group of people behind them had turned up the volume of their radio and the commentary, of the final countdown at Cape Kennedy, boomed into the air over their heads.

Pelham said: 'IRM's – innate releasing mechanisms. I've described them to you before, they're inherited reflexes –' He stopped, watching his wife impatiently.

Mildred had turned on him the dead stare with which she surveyed the remainder of the people on the beach. Testily Pelham snapped: 'Mildred, I'm trying to explain Sherrington's theory about the satellites!'

Undeterred, Mildred shook her head. 'Roger, it's too noisy here, I can't possibly listen. And to Sherrington's theories less than to anyone else's.'

Almost imperceptibly, another wave of restless activity was sweeping along the beach. Perhaps in response to the final digital climax of the commentators at Cape Kennedy, people were sitting up and dusting the coarse sand from each other's backs. Pelham watched the sunlight flickering off the chromium radio sets and diamante sunglasses as the entire beach swayed and surged. The noise had fallen appreciably, letting through the sound of the wurlitzer at the funfair. Everywhere there was the same expectant stirring. To Pelham, his eyes half-closed in the glare, the beach seemed like an immense pit of seething white snakes.

Somewhere, a woman's voice shouted. Pelham sat forward, searching the rows of faces masked by sunglasses. There was a sharp edge to the air, an unpleasant and almost sinister implication of violence hidden below the orderly surface.

Gradually, however, the activity subsided. The great throng relaxed and reclined again. Greasily, the water lapped at the supine feet of the people lying by the edge of the sea. Propelled by one of the off-shore swells, a little slack air moved over the beach, carrying with it the sweet odour of sweat and suntan lotion. Averting his face, Pelham felt a spasm of nausea contract his gullet. Without doubt, he reflected, homo sapiens en masse presented a more unsavoury spectacle than almost any other species of animal. A corral of horses or steers conveyed an impression of powerful nervous grace, but this mass of articulated albino flesh sprawled on the beach resembled the diseased anatomical fantasy of a surrealist painter. Why had all these people congregated there? The weather reports that morning had not been especially propitious. Most of the announcements were devoted to the news of the imminent satellite launching, the last stage of the worldwide communications network which would now provide every square foot of the globe with a straight-line visual contact with one or other of the score of satellites in orbit. Perhaps the final sealing

of this inescapable aerial canopy had prompted everyone to seek out the nearest beach and perform a symbolic act of self-exposure as a last gesture of surrender.

Uneasily, Pelham moved about in his chair, suddenly aware of the edge of the metal table cutting into his elbows. The cheap slatted seat was painfully uncomfortable, and his whole body seemed enclosed in an iron maiden of spikes and clamps. Again a curious premonition of some appalling act of violence stirred through his mind, and he looked up at the sky, almost expecting an airliner to plunge from the distant haze and disintegrate on the crowded beach in front of him.

To Mildred he remarked: 'It's remarkable how popular sunbathing can become. It was a major social problem in Australia before the second World War.'

Mildred's eyes flickered upwards from her book. 'There was probably nothing else to do.'

'That's just the point. As long as people are prepared to spend their entire time sprawled on a beach there's little hope of ever building up any other pastimes. Sunbathing is anti-social because it's an entirely passive pursuit.' He dropped his voice when he noticed the people sitting around him glancing over their shoulders, ears drawn to his high precise diction. 'On the other hand, it does bring people together. In the nude, or the near-nude, the shop-girl and the duchess are virtually indistinguishable.'

'*Are* they?'

Pelham shrugged. 'You know what I mean. But I think the psychological role of the beach is much more interesting. The tide-line is a particularly significant area, a penumbral zone that is both of the sea and above it, forever half-immersed in the great time-womb. If you accept the sea as an image of the unconscious, then this beachward urge might be seen as an attempt to escape from the existential role of ordinary life and return to the universal time-sea –'

'Roger, please!' Mildred looked away wearily. 'You sound like Charles Sherrington.'

Pelham stared out to sea again. Below him, a radio commentator announced the position and speed of the successfully launched satellite, and its pathway around the globe. Idly, Pelham calculated that it would take some fifteen minutes to reach them, almost exactly at half past three. Of course it would not be visible from the beach, although Sherrington's recent work on the perception of infra-red radiation suggested some of the infra-red light reflected from the sun might be perceived subliminally by their retinas.

Reflecting on the opportunities this offered to a commercial or political demagogue, Pelham listened to the radio on the sand below, when a long white arm reached out and switched it off. The possessor of the arm, a plump white-skinned girl with the face of a placid madonna, her round cheeks framed by ringlets of black hair, rolled over on to her back, disengaging herself from her companions, and for a moment she

and Pelham exchanged glances. He assumed that she had deliberately switched off the radio to prevent him hearing the commentary, and then realized that in fact the girl had been listening to his voice and hoped that he would resume his monologue.

Flattered, Pelham studied the girl's round serious face, and her mature but child-like figure stretched out almost as close to him, and as naked, as it would have been had they shared a bed. Her frank, adolescent but curiously tolerant expression barely changed, and Pelham turned away, unwilling to accept its implications, realizing with a pang the profound extent of his resignation to Mildred, and the now unbreachable insulation this provided against any new or real experience in his life. For ten years the thousand cautions and compromises accepted each day to make existence tolerable had steadily secreted their numbing anodynes, and what remained of his original personality, with all its possibilities, was embalmed like a specimen in a jar. Once he would have despised himself for accepting his situation so passively, but he was now beyond any real self-judgment, for no criteria were valid by which to assess himself, a state of gracelessness far more abject than that of the vulgar, stupid herd on the beach around him.

'Something's in the water.' Mildred pointed along the shore. 'Over there.'

Pelham followed her raised arm. Two hundred yards away a small crowd had gathered at the water's edge, the sluggish waves breaking at their feet as they watched some activity in the shallows. Many of the people had raised newspapers to shield their heads, and the older women in the group held their skirts between their knees.

'I can't see anything.' Pelham rubbed his chin, distracted by a bearded man on the edge of the promenade above him, a face not Sherrington's but remarkably like it. 'There seems to be no danger, anyway. Some unusual sea-fish may have been cast ashore.'

On the terrace, and below on the beach, everyone was waiting for something to happen, heads craned forward expectantly. As the radios were turned down, so that any sounds from the distant tableau might be heard, a wave of silence passed along the beach like an immense darkening cloud shutting off the sunlight. The almost complete absence of noise and movement, after the long hours of festering motion, seemed strange and uncanny, focusing an intense atmosphere of self-awareness upon the thousands of watching figures.

The group by the water's edge remained where they stood, even the small children staring placidly at whatever held the attention of their parents. For the first time a narrow section of the beach was visible, a clutter of radios and beach equipment half-buried in the sand like discarded metallic refuse. Gradually the new arrivals pressing down from the promenade occupied the empty places, a manoeuvre carried out without any reaction from the troupe by the tide-line. To Pelham they seemed like a family of penitent pilgrims who had travelled some

enormous distance and were now standing beside their sacred waters, waiting patiently for its revivifying powers to work their magic.

'What *is* going on?' Pelham asked, when after several minutes there was no indication of movement from the water-side group. He noticed that they formed a straight line, following the shore, rather than an arc. 'They're not watching anything at all.'

The off-shore haze was now only five hundred yards away, obscuring the contours of the huge swells. Completely opaque, the water looked like warm oil, a few wavelets now and then dissolving into greasy bubbles as they expired limply on the sand, intermingled with bits of refuse and old cigarette cartons. Nudging the shore like this, the sea resembled an enormous pelagic beast roused from its depths and blindly groping at the sand.

'Mildred, I'm going down to the water for a moment.' Pelham stood up. 'There's something curious –' He broke off, pointing to the beach on the other side of the terrace. 'Look! There's another group. What on earth –?'

Again, as everyone watched, this second body of spectators formed by the water's edge seventy-five yards from the terrace. Altogether some two hundred people were silently assembling along the shore-line, gazing out across the sea in front of them. Pelham found himself cracking his knuckles, then clasped the rail with both hands, as much to restrain himself from joining them. Only the congestion on the beach held him back.

This time the interest of the crowd passed in a few moments, and the murmur of background noise resumed.

'Heaven knows what they're doing.' Mildred turned her back on the group. 'There are more of them over there. They must be waiting for something.'

Sure enough, half a dozen similar groups were now forming by the water's edge, at almost precise one hundred yard intervals. Pelham scanned the far ends of the bay for any signs of a motor boat. He glanced at his watch. It was nearly 3:30. 'They can't be waiting for anything,' he said, trying to control his nervousness. Below the table his feet twitched a restless tattoo, gripping for purchase on the sandy cement. 'The only thing expected is the satellite, and no one will see that anyway. There must be something in the water.' At the mention of the satellite he remembered Sherrington again. 'Mildred, don't you feel –'

Before he could continue the man behind him stood up with a curious lurch, as if hoping to reach the rail, and tipped the sharp edge of his seat into Pelham's back. For a moment, as he struggled to steady the man, Pelham was enveloped in a rancid smell of sweat and stale beer. He saw the glazed focus in the other's eyes, his rough unshaved chin and open mouth like a muzzle, pointing with a sort of impulsive appetite towards the sea.

'The satellite!' Freeing himself Pelham craned upwards at the sky. A pale impassive blue, it was clear of both aircraft and birds – although

they had seen gulls twenty miles inland that morning, as if a storm had been anticipated. As the glare stung his eyes, points of retinal light began to arc and swerve across the sky in epileptic orbits. One of these, however, apparently emerging from the western horizon, was moving steadily across the edge of his field of vision, boring dimly towards him.

Around them, people began to stand up, and chairs scraped and dragged across the floor. Several bottles toppled from one of the tables and smashed on the concrete.

'Mildred!'

Below them, in a huge disorganized mêlée extending as far as the eye could see, people were climbing slowly to their feet. The diffused murmur of the beach had given way to a more urgent, harsher sound, echoing overhead from either end of the bay. The whole beach seemed to writhe and stir with activity, the only motionless figures those of the people standing by the water. These now formed a continuous palisade along the shore, shutting off the sea. More and more people joined their ranks, and in places the line was nearly ten deep.

Everyone on the terrace was now standing. The crowds already on the beach were being driven forward by the pressure of new arrivals from the promenade, and the party below their table had been swept a further twenty yards towards the sea.

'Mildred, can you see Sherrington anywhere?' Confirming from her wristwatch that it was exactly 3:30, Pelham pulled her shoulder, trying to hold her attention. Mildred returned what was almost a vacant stare, an expression of glazed incomprehension. 'Mildred! We've got to get away from here!' Hoarsely, he shouted: 'Sherrington's convinced we can see some of the infra-red light shining from the satellites, they may form a pattern setting off IRM's laid down millions of years ago when other space vehicles were circling the earth. Mildred –!'

Helplessly, they were lifted from their seats and pressed against the rail. A huge concourse of people was moving down the beach, and soon the entire five-mile-long slope was packed with standing figures. No one was talking, and everywhere there was the same expression, self-immersed and preoccupied, like that on the faces of a crowd leaving a stadium. Behind them the great wheel of the fairground was rotating slowly, but the gondolas were empty, and Pelham looked back at the deserted funfair only a hundred yards from the multitude on the beach, its roundabouts revolving among the empty sideshows.

Quickly he helped Mildred over the edge of the rail, then jumped down on to the sand, hoping to work their way back to the promenade. As they stepped around the corner, however, the crowd advancing down the beach carried them back, tripping over the abandoned radios in the sand.

Still together, they found their footing when the pressure behind them ceased. Steadying himself, Pelham continued: '... Sherrington thinks Cro-Magnon Man was driven frantic by panic, like the Gadarene swine

– most of the bone-beds have been found under lake shores. The reflex may be too strong –' He broke off.

The noise had suddenly subsided, as the immense congregation, now packing every available square foot of the beach, stood silently facing the water. Pelham turned towards the sea, where the haze, only fifty yards away, edged in great clouds towards the beach. The forward line of the crowd, their heads bowed slightly, stared passively at the gathering billows. The surface of the water glowed with an intense luminous light, vibrant and spectral, and the air over the beach, grey by comparison, made the lines of motionless figures loom like tombstones.

Obliquely in front of Pelham, twenty yards away in the front rank, stood a tall man with a quiet, meditative expression, his beard and high temples identifying him without doubt.

'Sherrington!' Pelham started to shout. Involuntarily he looked upwards to the sky, and felt a blinding speck of light singe his retinas.

In the background the music of the funfair revolved in the empty air.

Then, with a galvanic surge, everyone on the beach began to walk forward into the water.

1963

A QUESTION OF RE-ENTRY

All day they had moved steadily upstream, occasionally pausing to raise the propeller and cut away the knots of weed, and by 3 o'clock had covered some seventy-five miles. Fifty yards away, on either side of the patrol launch, the high walls of the jungle river rose over the water, the unbroken massif of the mato grosso which swept across the Amazonas from Campos Buros to the delta of the Orinoco. Despite their progress – they had set off from the telegraph station at Tres Buritis at 7 o'clock that morning – the river showed no inclination to narrow or alter its volume. Sombre and unchanging, the forest followed its course, the aerial canopy shutting off the sunlight and cloaking the water along the banks with a black velvet sheen. Now and then the channel would widen into a flat expanse of what appeared to be stationary water, the slow oily swells which disturbed its surface transforming it into a sluggish mirror of the distant, enigmatic sky, the islands of rotten balsa logs refracted by the layers of haze like the drifting archipelagoes of a dream. Then the channel would narrow again and the cooling jungle darkness enveloped the launch.

Although for the first few hours Connolly had joined Captain Pereira at the rail, he had become bored with the endless green banks of the forest sliding past them, and since noon had remained in the cabin, pretending to study the trajectory maps. The time might pass more slowly there, but at least it was cooler and less depressing. The fan hummed and pivoted, and the clicking of the cutwater and the whispering plaint of the current past the gliding hull soothed the slight headache induced by the tepid beer he and Pereira had shared after lunch.

This first encounter with the jungle had disappointed Connolly. His previous experience had been confined to the Dredging Project at Lake Maracaibo, where the only forests consisted of the abandoned oil rigs built out into the water. Their rusting hulks, and the huge draglines and pontoons of the dredging teams, were fauna of a man-made species. In the Amazonian jungle he had expected to see the full variety of nature in its richest and most colourful outpouring, but instead it was nothing more than a moribund tree-level swamp, unweeded and overgrown, if anything more dead than alive, an example of bad husbandry on a continental scale. The margins of the river were rarely well defined; except where enough rotting trunks had gathered to form a firm parapet, there were no formal banks, and the shallows ran off among the undergrowth for a hundred

yards, irrigating huge areas of vegetation that were already drowning in moisture.

Connolly had tried to convey his disenchantment to Pereira, who now sat under the awning on the deck, placidly smoking a cheroot, partly to repay the Captain for his polite contempt for Connolly and everything his mission implied. Like all the officers of the Native Protection Missions whom Connolly had met, first in Venezuela and now in Brazil, Pereira maintained a proprietary outlook towards the jungle and its mystique, which would not be breached by any number of fresh-faced investigators in their crisp drill uniforms. Captain Pereira had not been impressed by the UN flashes on Connolly's shoulders with their orbital monogram, nor by the high-level request for assistance cabled to the Mission three weeks earlier from Brasilia. To Pereira, obviously, the office suites in the white towers at the capital were as far away as New York, London or Babylon.

Superficially, the Captain had been helpful enough, supervising the crew as they stowed Connolly's monitoring equipment aboard, checking his Smith & Wesson and exchanging a pair of defective mosquito boots. As long as Connolly had wanted to, he had conversed away amiably, pointing out this and that feature of the landscape, identifying an unusual bird or lizard on an overhead bough.

But his indifference to the real object of the mission – he had given a barely perceptible nod when Connolly described it – soon became obvious. It was this neutrality which irked Connolly, implying that Pereira spent all his time ferrying UN investigators up and down the rivers after their confounded lost space capsule like so many tourists in search of some non-existent El Dorado. Above all there was the suggestion that Connolly and the hundreds of other investigators deployed around the continent were being too persistent. When all was said and done, Pereira implied, five years had elapsed since the returning lunar spacecraft, the *Goliath* 7, had plummeted into the South American land mass, and to prolong the search indefinitely was simply bad form, even, perhaps, necrophilic. There was not the faintest chance of the pilot still being alive, so he should be decently forgotten, given a statue outside a railway station or airport car park and left to the pigeons.

Connolly would have been glad to explain the reasons for the indefinite duration of the search, the overwhelming moral reasons, apart from the political and technical ones. He would have liked to point out that the lost astronaut, Colonel Francis Spender, by accepting the immense risks of the flight to and from the Moon, was owed the absolute discharge of any assistance that could be given him. He would have liked to remind Pereira that the successful landing on the Moon, after some half-dozen fatal attempts – at least three of the luckless pilots were still orbiting the Moon in their dead ships – was the culmination of an age-old ambition with profound psychological implications for mankind, and that the failure to find the astronaut after his return might induce

unassuageable feelings of guilt and inadequacy. (If the sea was a symbol of the unconscious, was space perhaps an image of unfettered time, and the inability to penetrate it a tragic exile to one of the limbos of eternity, a symbolic death in life?)

But Captain Pereira was not interested. Calmly inhaling the scented aroma of his cheroot, he sat imperturbably at the rail, surveying the fetid swamps that moved past them.

Shortly before noon, when they had covered some 40 miles, Connolly pointed to the remains of a bamboo landing stage elevated on high poles above the bank. A threadbare rope bridge trailed off among the mangroves, and through an embrasure in the forest they could see a small clearing where a clutter of abandoned adobe huts dissolved like refuse heaps in the sunlight.

'Is this one of their camps?'

Pereira shook his head. 'The Espirro tribe, closely related to the Nambikwaras. Three years ago one of them carried influenza back from the telegraph station, an epidemic broke out, turned into a form of pulmonary edema, within forty-eight hours three hundred Indians had died. The whole group disintegrated, only about fifteen of the men and their families are still alive. A great tragedy.'

They moved forward to the bridge and stood beside the tall Negro helmsman as the two other members of the crew began to shackle sections of fine wire mesh into a cage over the deck. Pereira raised his binoculars and scanned the river ahead.

'Since the Espirros vacated the area the Nambas have begun to forage down this far. We won't see any of them, but it's as well to be on the safe side.'

'Do you mean they're hostile?' Connolly asked.

'Not in a conscious sense. But the various groups which comprise the Nambikwaras are permanently feuding with each other, and this far from the settlement we might easily be involved in an opportunist attack. Once we get to the settlement we'll be all right – there's a sort of precarious equilibrium there. But even so, have your wits about you. As you'll see, they're as nervous as birds.'

'How does Ryker manage to keep out of their way? Hasn't he been here for years?'

'About twelve.' Pereira sat down on the gunwale and eased his peaked cap off his forehead. 'Ryker is something of a special case. Temperamentally he's rather explosive – I meant to warn you to handle him carefully, he might easily whip up an incident – but he seems to have manoeuvred himself into a position of authority with the tribe. In some ways he's become an umpire, arbitrating in their various feuds. How he does it I haven't discovered yet; it's quite uncharacteristic of the Indians to regard a white man in that way. However, he's useful to us, we might eventually set up a mission here. Though that's next to impossible – we tried it once and the Indians just moved 500 miles away.'

Connolly looked back at the derelict landing stage as it disappeared around a bend, barely distinguishable from the jungle, which was as dilapidated as this sole mournful artifact.

'What on earth made Ryker come out here?' He had heard something in Brasilia of this strange figure, sometime journalist and man of action, the self-proclaimed world citizen who at the age of forty-two, after a life spent venting his spleen on civilization and its gimcrack gods, had suddenly disappeared into the Amazonas and taken up residence with one of the aboriginal tribes. Most latter-day Gauguins were absconding confidence men or neurotics, but Ryker seemed to be a genuine character in his own right, the last of a race of true individualists retreating before the barbed-wire fences and regimentation of 20th-century life. But his chosen paradise seemed pretty scruffy and degenerate, Connolly reflected, when one saw it at close quarters. However, as long as the man could organize the Indians into a few search parties he would serve his purpose. 'I can't understand why Ryker should pick the Amazon basin. The South Pacific yes, but from all I've heard – and you've confirmed just now – the Indians appear to be a pretty diseased and miserable lot, hardly the noble savage.'

Captain Pereira shrugged, looking away across the oily water, his plump sallow face mottled by the lace-like shadow of the wire netting. He belched discreetly to himself, and then adjusted his holster belt. 'I don't know the South Pacific, but I should guess it's also been oversentimentalized. Ryker didn't come here for a scenic tour. I suppose the Indians are diseased and, yes, reasonably miserable. Within fifty years they'll probably have died out. But for the time being they do represent a certain form of untamed, natural existence, which after all made us what we are. The hazards facing them are immense, and they survive.' He gave Connolly a sly smile. 'But you must argue it out with Ryker.'

They lapsed into silence and sat by the rail, watching the river unfurl itself. Exhausted and collapsing, the great trees crowded the banks, the dying expiring among the living, jostling each other aside as if for a last despairing assault on the patrol boat and its passengers. For the next half an hour, until they opened their lunch packs, Connolly searched the tree-tops for the giant bifurcated parachute which should have carried the capsule to earth. Virtually impermeable to the atmosphere, it would still be visible, spreadeagled like an enormous bird over the canopy of leaves. Then, after drinking a can of Pereira's beer, he excused himself and went down to the cabin.

The two steel cases containing the monitoring equipment had been stowed under the chart table, and he pulled them out and checked that the moisture-proof seals were still intact. The chances of making visual contact with the capsule were infinitesimal, but as long as it was intact it would continue to transmit both a sonar and radio beacon, admittedly over little more than twenty miles, but sufficient to identify its whereabouts to anyone in the immediate neighbourhood. However, the

entire northern half of the South Americas had been covered by successive aerial sweeps, and it seemed unlikely that the beacons were still operating. The disappearance of the capsule argued that it had sustained at least minor damage, and by now the batteries would have been corroded by the humid air.

Recently certain of the UN Space Department agencies had begun to circulate the unofficial view that Colonel Spender had failed to select the correct attitude for re-entry and that the capsule had been vaporized on its final descent, but Connolly guessed that this was merely an attempt to pacify world opinion and prepare the way for the resumption of the space programme. Not only the Lake Maracaibo Dredging Project, but his own presence on the patrol boat, indicated that the Department still believed Colonel Spender to be alive, or at least to have survived the landing. His final re-entry orbit should have brought him down into the landing zone 500 miles to the east of Trinidad, but the last radio contact before the ionization layers around the capsule severed transmission indicated that he had under-shot his trajectory and come down somewhere on the South American land-mass along a line linking Lake Maracaibo with Brasilia.

Footsteps sounded down the companionway, and Captain Pereira lowered himself into the cabin. He tossed his hat onto the chart table and sat with his back to the fan, letting the air blow across his fading hair, carrying across to Connolly a sweet unsavoury odour of garlic and cheap pomade.

'You're a sensible man, Lieutenant. Anyone who stays up on deck is crazy. However,' – he indicated Connolly's pallid face and hands, a memento of a long winter in New York – 'in a way it's a pity you couldn't have put in some sunbathing. That metropolitan pallor will be quite a curiosity to the Indians.' He smiled agreeably, showing the yellowing teeth which made his olive complexion even darker. 'You may well be the first white man in the literal sense that the Indians have seen.'

'What about Ryker? Isn't he white?'

'Black as a berry now. Almost indistinguishable from the Indians, apart from being 7 feet tall.' He pulled over a collection of cardboard boxes at the far end of the seat and began to rummage through them. Inside was a collection of miscellaneous oddments – balls of thread and raw cotton, lumps of wax and resin, urucu paste, tobacco and seed-beads. 'These ought to assure them of your good intentions.'

Connolly watched as he fastened the boxes together. 'How many search parties will they buy? Are you sure you brought enough? I have a fifty-dollar allocation for gifts.'

'Good,' Pereira said matter-of-factly. 'We'll get some more beer. Don't worry, you can't buy these people, Lieutenant. You have to rely on their good-will; this rubbish will put them in the right frame of mind to talk.'

Connolly smiled dourly. 'I'm more keen on getting them off their

hunkers and out into the bush. How are you going to organize the search parties?'

'They've already taken place.'

'What?' Connolly sat forward. 'How did that happen? But they should have waited' – he glanced at the heavy monitoring equipment – 'they can't have known what –'

Pereira silenced him with a raised hand. 'My dear Lieutenant. Relax, I was speaking figuratively. Can't you understand, these people are nomadic, they spend all their lives continually on the move. They must have covered every square foot of this forest a hundred times in the past five years. There's no need to send them out again. Your only hope is that they may have seen something and then persuade them to talk.'

Connolly considered this, as Pereira unwrapped another parcel. 'All right, but I may want to do a few patrols. I can't just sit around for three days.'

'Naturally. Don't worry, Lieutenant. If your astronaut came down anywhere within 500 miles of here they'll know about it.' He unwrapped the parcel and removed a small teak cabinet. The front panel was slotted, and lifted to reveal the face of a large ormolu table clock, its Gothic hands and numerals below a gilded belldome. Captain Pereira compared its time with his wrist-watch. 'Good. Running perfectly, it hasn't lost a second in forty-eight hours. This should put us in Ryker's good books.'

Connolly shook his head. 'Why on earth does he want a clock? I thought the man had turned his back on such things.'

Pereira packed the tooled metal face away. 'Ah, well, whenever we escape from anything we always carry a memento of it with us. Ryker collects clocks; this is the third I've bought for him. God knows what he does with them.'

The launch had changed course, and was moving in a wide circle across the river, the current whispering in a tender rippling murmur across the hull. They made their way up onto the deck, where the helmsman was unshackling several sections of the wire mesh in order to give himself an uninterrupted view of the bows. The two sailors climbed through the aperture and took up their positions fore and aft, boat-hooks at the ready.

They had entered a large bow-shaped extension of the river, where the current had overflowed the bank and produced a series of low-lying mud flats. Some two or three hundred yards wide, the water seemed to be almost motionless, seeping away through the trees which defined its margins so that the exit and inlet of the river were barely perceptible. At the inner bend of the bow, on the only firm ground, a small cantonment of huts had been built on a series of wooden palisades jutting out over the water. A narrow promontory of forest reached to either side of the cantonment, but a small area behind it had been cleared to form an open campong. On its far side were a number of wattle storage huts, a few dilapidated shacks and hovels of dried palm.

The entire area seemed deserted, but as they approached, the cutwater throwing a fine plume of white spray across the glassy swells, a few Indians appeared in the shadows below the creepers trailing over the jetty, watching them stonily. Connolly had expected to see a group of tall broad-shouldered warriors with white markings notched across their arms and cheeks, but these Indians were puny and degenerate, their pinched faces lowered beneath their squat bony skulls. They seemed undernourished and depressed, eyeing the visitors with a sort of sullen watchfulness, like pariah dogs from a gutter.

Pereira was shielding his eyes from the sun, across whose inclining path they were now moving, searching the ramshackle bungalow built of woven rattan at the far end of the jetty.

'No signs of Ryker yet. He's probably asleep or drunk.' He noticed Connolly's distasteful frown. 'Not much of a place, I'm afraid.'

As they moved towards the jetty, the wash from the launch slapping at the greasy bamboo poles and throwing a gust of foul air into their faces, Connolly looked back across the open disc of water, into which the curving wake of the launch was dissolving in a final summary of their long voyage up-river to the derelict settlement, fading into the slack brown water like a last tenuous thread linking him with the order and sanity of civilization. A strange atmosphere of emptiness hung over this inland lagoon, a flat pall of dead air that in a curious way was as menacing as any overt signs of hostility, as if the crudity and violence of all the Amazonian jungles met here in a momentary balance which some untoward movement of his own might upset, unleashing appalling forces. Away in the distance, down-shore, the great trees leaned like corpses into the glazed air, and the haze over the water embalmed the jungle and the late afternoon in an uneasy stillness.

They bumped against the jetty, rocking lightly into the palisade of poles and dislodging a couple of water-logged outriggers lashed together. The helmsman reversed the engine, waiting for the sailors to secure the lines. None of the Indians had come forward to assist them. Connolly caught a glimpse of one old simian face regarding him with a rheumy eye, riddled teeth nervously worrying a pouch-like lower lip.

He turned to Pereira, glad that the Captain would be interceding between himself and the Indians. 'Captain, I should have asked before, but – are these Indians cannibalistic?'

Pereira shook his head, steadying himself against a stanchion. 'Not at all. Don't worry about that, they'd have been extinct years ago if they were.'

'Not even – white men?' For some reason Connolly found himself placing a peculiarly indelicate emphasis upon the word 'white'.

Pereira laughed, straightening his uniform jacket. 'For God's sake, Lieutenant, no. Are you worrying that your astronaut might have been eaten by them?'

'I suppose it's a possibility.'

'I assure you, there have been no recorded cases. As a matter of interest,

it's a rare practice on this continent. Much more typical of Africa – and Europe,' he added with sly humour. Pausing to smile at Connolly, he said quietly, 'Don't despise the Indians, Lieutenant. However diseased and dirty they may be, at least they are in equilibrium with their environment. And with themselves. You'll find no Christopher Columbuses or Colonel Spenders here, but no Belsens either. Perhaps one is as much a symptom of unease as the other?'

They had begun to drift down the jetty, over-running one of the outriggers, whose bow creaked and disappeared under the stern of the launch, and Pereira shouted at the helmsman: 'Ahead, Sancho! More ahead! Damn Ryker, where is the man?'

Churning out a niagara of boiling brown water, the launch moved forward, driving its shoulder into the bamboo supports, and the entire jetty sprung lightly under the impact. As the motor was cut and the lines finally secured, Connolly looked up at the jetty above his head.

Scowling down at him, an expression of bilious irritability on his heavy-jawed face, was a tall bare-chested man wearing a pair of frayed cotton shorts and a sleeve-less waistcoat of pleated raffia, his dark eyes almost hidden by a wide-brimmed straw hat. The heavy muscles of his exposed chest and arms were the colour of tropical teak, and the white scars on his lips and the fading traces of the heat ulcers which studded his shin bones provided the only lighter colouring. Standing there, arms akimbo with a sort of jaunty arrogance, he seemed to represent to Connolly that quality of untamed energy which he had so far found so conspicuously missing from the forest.

Completing his scrutiny of Connolly, the big man bellowed: 'Pereira, for God's sake, what do you think you're doing? That's my bloody outrigger you've just run down! Tell that steersman of yours to get the cataracts out of his eyes or I'll put a bullet through his back-side!'

Grinning good-humouredly, Pereira pulled himself up on to the jetty. 'My dear Ryker, contain yourself. Remember your blood-pressure.' He peered down at the water-logged hulk of the derelict canoe which was now ejecting itself slowly from the river. 'Anyway, what good is a canoe to you, you're not going anywhere.'

Grudgingly, Ryker shook Pereira's hand. 'That's what you like to think, Captain. You and your confounded Mission, you want me to do all the work. Next time you may find I've gone a thousand miles up-river. And taken the Nambas with me.'

'What an epic prospect, Ryker. You'll need a Homer to celebrate it.' Pereira turned and gestured Connolly on to the jetty. The Indians were still hanging about listlessly, like guilty intruders.

Ryker eyed Connolly's uniform suspiciously. 'Who's this? Another so-called anthropologist, sniffing about for smut? I warned you last time, I will not have any more of those.'

'No, Ryker. Can't you recognize the uniform? Let me introduce

Lieutenant Connolly, of that brotherhood of latter-day saints, by whose courtesy and generosity we live in peace together – the United Nations.'

'What? Don't tell me they've got a mandate here now? God above, I suppose he'll bore my head off about cereal/protein ratios!' His ironic groan revealed a concealed reserve of acid humour.

'Relax. The Lieutenant is very charming and polite. He works for the Space Department, Reclamation Division. You know, searching for lost aircraft and the like. There's a chance you may be able to help him.' Pereira winked at Connolly and steered him forward. 'Lieutenant, the Rajah Ryker.'

'I doubt it,' Ryker said dourly. They shook hands, the corded muscles of Ryker's fingers like a trap. Despite his thick-necked stoop, Ryker was a good six to ten inches taller than Connolly. For a moment he held on to Connolly's hand, a slight trace of wariness revealed below his mask of bad temper. 'When did this plane come down?' he asked. Connolly guessed that he was already thinking of a profitable salvage operation.

'Some time ago,' Pereira said mildly. He picked up the parcel containing the cabinet clock and began to stroll after Ryker towards the bungalow at the end of the jetty. A low-eaved dwelling of woven rattan, its single room was surrounded on all sides by a veranda, the overhanging roof shading it from the sunlight. Creepers trailed across from the surrounding foliage, involving it in the background of palms and fronds, so that the house seemed a momentary formalization of the jungle.

'But the Indians might have heard something about it,' Pereira went on. 'Five years ago, as a matter of fact.'

Ryker snorted. 'My God, you've got a hope.' They went up the steps on to the veranda, where a slim-shouldered Indian youth, his eyes like moist marbles, was watching from the shadows. With a snap of irritation, Ryker cupped his hand around the youth's pate and propelled him with a backward swing down the steps. Sprawling on his knees, the youth picked himself up, eyes still fixed on Connolly, then emitted what sounded like a high-pitched nasal hoot, compounded partly of fear and partly of excitement. Connolly looked back from the doorway, and noticed that several other Indians had stepped onto the pier and were watching him with the same expression of rapt curiosity.

Pereira patted Connolly's shoulder. 'I told you they'd be impressed. Did you see that, Ryker?'

Ryker nodded curtly, as they entered his living-room pulled off his straw hat and tossed it on to a couch under the window. The room was dingy and cheerless. Crude bamboo shelves were strung around the walls, ornamented with a few primitive carvings of ivory and bamboo. A couple of rocking chairs and a card-table were in the centre of the room, dwarfed by an immense Victorian mahogany dresser standing against the rear wall. With its castellated mirrors and ornamental pediments it looked like an altar-piece stolen from a cathedral. At first glance it appeared to

be leaning to one side, but then Connolly saw that its rear legs had been carefully raised from the tilting floor with a number of small wedges. In the centre of the dresser, its multiple reflections receding to infinity in a pair of small wing mirrors, was a cheap three-dollar alarm clock, ticking away loudly. An over-and-under Winchester shotgun leaned against the wall beside it.

Gesturing Pereira and Connolly into the chairs, Ryker raised the blind over the rear window. Outside was the compound, the circle of huts around its perimeter. A few Indians squatted in the shadows, spears upright between their knees.

Connolly watched Ryker moving about in front of him, aware that the man's earlier impatience had given away to a faint but noticeable edginess. Ryker glanced irritably through the window, apparently annoyed to see the gradual gathering of the Indians before their huts.

There was a sweetly unsavoury smell in the room, and over his shoulder Connolly saw that the card-table was loaded with a large bale of miniature animal skins, those of a vole or some other forest rodent. A half-hearted attempt had been made to trim the skins, and tags of clotted blood clung to their margins.

Ryker jerked the table with his foot. 'Well, here you are,' he said to Pereira. 'Twelve dozen. They took a hell of a lot of getting, I can tell you. You've brought the clock?'

Pereira nodded, still holding the parcel in his lap. He gazed distastefully at the dank scruffy skins. 'Have you got some rats in there, Ryker? These don't look much good. Perhaps we should check through them outside . . .'

'Dammit, Pereira, don't be a fool!' Ryker snapped. 'They're as good as you'll get. I had to trim half the skins myself. Let's have a look at the clock.'

'Wait a minute.' The Captain's jovial, easy-going manner had stiffened. Making the most of his temporary advantage, he reached out and touched one of the skins gingerly, shaking his head. 'Pugh . . . Do you know how much I paid for this clock, Ryker? Seventy-five dollars. That's your credit for three years. I'm not so sure. And you're not very helpful, you know. Now about this aircraft that may have come down –'

Ryker snapped his fingers. 'Forget it. Nothing did. The Nambas tell me everything.' He turned to Connolly. 'You can take it from me there's no trace of an aircraft around here. Any rescue mission would be wasting their time.'

Pereira watched Ryker critically. 'As a matter of fact it wasn't an aircraft.' He tapped Connolly's shoulder flash. 'It was a rocket capsule – with a man on board. A very important and valuable man. None other than the Moon pilot, Colonel Francis Spender.'

'Well . . .' Eyebrows raised in mock surprise, Ryker ambled to the window, stared out at a group of Indians who had advanced halfway across the compound. 'My God, what next! The Moon pilot. Do they

really think he's around here? But what a place to roost.' He leaned out of the window and bellowed at the Indians, who retreated a few paces and then held their ground. 'Damn fools,' he muttered, 'this isn't a zoo.'

Pereira handed him the parcel, watching the Indians. There were more than fifty around the compound now, squatting in their doorways, a few of the younger men honing their spears. 'They are remarkably curious,' he said to Ryker, who had taken the parcel over to the dresser and was unwrapping it carefully. 'Surely they've seen a pale-skinned man before?'

'They've nothing better to do.' Ryker lifted the clock out of the cabinet with his big hands, with great care placed it beside the alarm clock, the almost inaudible motion of its pendulum lost in the metallic chatter of the latter's escapement. For a moment he gazed at the ornamental hands and numerals. Then he picked up the alarm clock and with an almost valedictory pat, like an officer dismissing a faithful if stupid minion, locked it away in the cupboard below. His former buoyancy returning, he gave Pereira a playful slap on the shoulder. 'Captain, if you want any more rat-skins just give me a shout!'

Backing away, Pereira's heel touched one of Connolly's feet, distracting Connolly from a problem he had been puzzling over since their entry into the hut. Like a concealed clue in a detective story, he was sure that he had noticed something of significance, but was unable to identify it.

'We won't worry about the skins,' Pereira said. 'What we'll do with your assistance, Ryker, is to hold a little parley with the chiefs, see whether they remember anything of this capsule.'

Ryker stared out at the Indians now standing directly below the veranda. Irritably he slammed down the blind. 'For God's sake, Pereira, they don't. Tell the Lieutenant he isn't interviewing people on Park Avenue or Piccadilly. If the Indians had seen anything I'd know.'

'Perhaps.' Pereira shrugged. 'Still, I'm under instructions to assist Lieutenant Connolly and it won't do any harm to ask.'

Connolly sat up. 'Having come this far, Captain, I feel I should do two or three forays into the bush.' To Ryker he explained: 'They've recalculated the flight path of the final trajectory, there's a chance he may have come down further along the landing zone. Here, very possibly.'

Shaking his head, Ryker slumped down on to the couch, and drove one fist angrily into the other. 'I suppose this means they'll be landing here at any time with thousands of bulldozers and flame-throwers. Dammit, Lieutenant, if you have to send a man to the Moon, why don't you do it in your own back yard?'

Pereira stood up. 'We'll be gone in a couple of days, Ryker.' He nodded judiciously at Connolly and moved towards the door.

As Connolly climbed to his feet Ryker called out suddenly: 'Lieutenant. You can tell me something I've wondered.' There was an unpleasant downward curve to his mouth, and his tone was belligerent and provocative. 'Why did they really send a man to the Moon?'

Connolly paused. He had remained silent during the conversation, not wanting to antagonize Ryker. The rudeness and complete self-immersion were pathetic rather than annoying. 'Do you mean the military and political reasons?'

'No, I don't.' Ryker stood up, arms akimbo again, measuring Connolly. 'I mean the *real* reasons, Lieutenant.'

Connolly gestured vaguely. For some reason formulating a satisfactory answer seemed more difficult than he had expected. 'Well, I suppose you could say it was the natural spirit of exploration.'

Ryker snorted derisively. 'Do you seriously believe that, Lieutenant? "The spirit of exploration!" My God! What a fantastic idea. Pereira doesn't believe that, do you, Captain?'

Before Connolly could reply Pereira took his arm. 'Come on, Lieutenant. This is no time for a metaphysical discussion.' To Ryker he added: 'It doesn't much matter what you and I believe, Ryker. A man went to the Moon and came back. He needs our help.'

Ryker frowned ruefully. 'Poor chap. He must be feeling pretty unhappy by now. Though anyone who gets as far as the Moon and is fool enough to come back deserves what he gets.'

There was a scuffle of feet on the veranda, and as they stepped out into the sunlight a couple of Indians darted away along the jetty, watching Connolly with undiminished interest.

Ryker remained in the doorway, staring listlessly at the clock, but as they were about to climb into the launch he came after them. Now and then glancing over his shoulder at the encroaching semi-circle of Indians, he gazed down at Connolly with sardonic contempt. 'Lieutenant,' he called out before they went below. 'Has it occurred to you that if he had landed, Spender might have wanted to stay on here?'

'I doubt it, Ryker,' Connolly said calmly. 'Anyway, there's little chance that Colonel Spender is still alive. What we're interested in finding is the capsule.'

Ryker was about to reply when a faint metallic buzz sounded from the direction of his hut. He looked around sharply, waiting for it to end, and for a moment the whole tableau, composed of the men on the launch, the gaunt outcast on the edge of the jetty and the Indians behind him, was frozen in an absurdly motionless posture. The mechanism of the old alarm clock had obviously been fully wound, and the buzz sounded for thirty seconds, finally ending with a high-pitched ping.

Pereira grinned. He glanced at his watch. 'It keeps good time, Ryker.' But Ryker had stalked off back to the hut, scattering the Indians before him.

Connolly watched the group dissolve, then suddenly snapped his fingers. 'You're right, Captain. It certainly does keep good time,' he repeated as they entered the cabin.

Evidently tired by the encounter with Ryker, Pereira slumped down among Connolly's equipment and unbuttoned his tunic. 'Sorry about

Ryker, but I warned you. Frankly, Lieutenant, we might as well leave now. There's nothing here. Ryker knows that. However, he's no fool, and he's quite capable of faking all sorts of evidence just to get a retainer out of you. He wouldn't mind if the bulldozers came.'

'I'm not so sure.' Connolly glanced briefly through the porthole. 'Captain, has Ryker got a radio?'

'Of course not. Why?'

'Are you certain?'

'Absolutely. It's the last thing the man would have. Anyway, there's no electrical supply here, and he has no batteries.' He noticed Connolly's intent expression. 'What's on your mind, Lieutenant?'

'You're his only contact? There are no other traders in the area?'

'None. The Indians are too dangerous, and there's nothing to trade. Why do you think Ryker has a radio?'

'He must have. Or something very similar. Captain, just now you remarked on the fact that his old alarm clock kept good time. Does it occur to you to ask *how*?'

Pereira sat up slowly. 'Lieutenant, you have a valid point.'

'Exactly. I knew there was something odd about those two clocks when they were standing side by side. That type of alarm clock is the cheapest obtainable, notoriously inaccurate. Often they lose two or three minutes in 24 hours. But that clock was telling the right time to within ten seconds. No optical instrument would give him that degree of accuracy.'

Pereira shrugged sceptically. 'But I haven't been here for over four months. And even then he didn't check the time with me.'

'Of course not. He didn't need to. The only possible explanation for such a degree of accuracy is that he's getting a daily time fix, either on a radio or some long-range beacon.'

'Wait a moment, Lieutenant.' Pereira watched the dusk light fall across the jungle. 'It's a remarkable coincidence, but there must be an innocent explanation. Don't jump straight to the conclusion that Ryker has some instrument taken from the missing Moon capsule. Other aircraft have crashed in the forest. And what would be the point? He's not running an airline or railway system. Why should he need to know the time, the *exact* time, to within ten seconds?'

Connolly tapped the lid of his monitoring case, controlling his growing exasperation at Pereira's reluctance to treat the matter seriously, at his whole permissive attitude of lazy tolerance towards Ryker, the Indians and the forest. Obviously he unconsciously resented Connolly's sharp-eyed penetration of this private world.

'Clocks have become his idée fixe,' Pereira continued. 'Perhaps he's developed an amazing sensitivity to its mechanism. Knowing exactly the right time could be a substitute for the civilization on which he turned his back.' Thoughtfully, Pereira moistened the end of his cheroot. 'But I agree that it's strange. Perhaps a little investigation would be worthwhile after all.'

After a cool jungle night in the air-conditioned cabin, the next day Connolly began discreetly to reconnoitre the area. Pereira took ashore two bottles of whisky and a soda syphon, and was able to keep Ryker distracted while Connolly roved about the campong with his monitoring equipment. Once or twice he heard Ryker bellow jocularly at him from his window as he lolled back over the whisky. At intervals, as Ryker slept, Pereira would come out into the sun, sweating like a drowsy pig in his stained uniform, and try to drive back the Indians.

'As long as you stay within earshot of Ryker you're safe,' he told Connolly. Chopped-out pathways criss-crossed the bush at all angles, a new one added whenever one of the bands returned to the campong, irrespective of those already established. This maze extended for miles around them. 'If you get lost, don't panic but stay where you are. Sooner or later we'll come out and find you.'

Eventually giving up his attempt to monitor any of the signal beacons built into the lost capsule – both the sonar and radio meters remained at zero – Connolly tried to communicate with the Indians by sign language, but with the exception of one, the youth with the moist limpid eyes who had been hanging about on Ryker's veranda, they merely stared at him stonily. This youth Pereira identified as the son of the former witch-doctor ('Ryker's more or less usurped his role, for some reason the old boy lost the confidence of the tribe'). While the other Indians gazed at Connolly as if seeing some invisible numinous shadow, some extra-corporeal nimbus which pervaded his body, the youth was obviously aware that Connolly possessed some special talent, perhaps not dissimilar from that which his father had once practised. However, Connolly's attempts to talk to the youth were handicapped by the fact that he was suffering from a purulent ophthalmia, gonococchic in origin and extremely contagious, which made his eyes water continuously. Many of the Indians suffered from this complaint, threatened by permanent blindness, and Connolly had seen them treating their eyes with water in which a certain type of fragrant bark had been dissolved.

Ryker's casual, off-hand authority over the Indians puzzled Connolly. Slumped back in his chair against the mahogany dresser, one hand touching the ormolu clock, most of the time he and Pereira indulged in a lachrymose back-chat. Then, oblivious of any danger, Ryker would amble out into the dusty campong, push his way blurrily through the Indians and drum up a party to collect fire wood for the water still, jerking them bodily to their feet as they squatted about their huts. What interested Connolly was the Indians' reaction to this type of treatment. They seemed to be restrained, not by any belief in his strength of personality or primitive kingship, but by a grudging acceptance that for the time being at any rate, Ryker possessed the whip hand over them all. Obviously Ryker served certain useful roles for them as an intermediary with the Mission, but this alone would not explain the sources of his power. Beyond certain more

or less defined limits – the perimeter of the campong – his authority was minimal.

A hint of explanation came on the second morning of their visit, when Connolly accidentally lost himself in the forest.

After breakfast Connolly sat under the awning on the deck of the patrol launch, gazing out over the brown, jelly-like surface of the river. The campong was silent. During the night the Indians had disappeared into the bush. Like lemmings they were apparently prone to these sudden irresistible urges. Occasionally the nomadic call would be strong enough to carry them 200 miles away; at other times they would set off in high spirits and then lose interest after a few miles, returning dispiritedly to the campong in small groups.

Deciding to make the most of their absence, Connolly shouldered the monitoring equipment and climbed onto the pier. A few dying fires smoked plaintively among the huts, and abandoned utensils and smashed pottery lay about in the red dust. In the distance the morning haze over the forest had lifted, and Connolly could see what appeared to be a low hill – a shallow rise no more than a hundred feet in height – which rose off the flat floor of the jungle a quarter of a mile away.

On his right, among the huts, someone moved. An old man sat alone among the refuse of pottery shards and raffia baskets, cross-legged under a small make-shift awning. Barely distinguishable from the dust, his moribund figure seemed to contain the whole futility of the Amazon forest.

Still musing on Ryker's motives for isolating himself in the jungle, Connolly made his way towards the distant rise.

Ryker's behaviour the previous evening had been curious. Shortly after dusk, when the sunset sank into the western forest, bathing the jungle in an immense ultramarine and golden light, the day-long chatter and movement of the Indians ceased abruptly. Connolly had been glad of the silence – the endless thwacks of the rattan canes and grating of the stone mills in which they mixed the Government-issue meal had become tiresome. Pereira made several cautious visits to the edge of the campong, and each time reported that the Indians were sitting in a huge circle outside their huts, watching Ryker's bungalow. The latter was lounging on his veranda in the moonlight, chin in hand, one boot up on the rail, morosely surveying the assembled tribe.

'They've got their spears and ceremonial feathers,' Pereira whispered. 'For a moment I almost believed they were preparing an attack.'

After waiting half an hour, Connolly climbed up on to the pier, found the Indians squatting in their dark silent circle, Ryker glaring down at them. Only the witch-doctor's son made any attempt to approach Connolly, sidling tentatively through the shadows, a piece of what appeared to be blue obsidian in his hand, some talisman of his father's that had lost its potency.

Uneasily, Connolly returned to the launch. Shortly after 3 a.m. they

were wakened in their bunks by a tremendous whoop, reached the deck to hear the stampede of feet through the dust, the hissing of overturned fires and cooking pots. Apparently leading the pack, Ryker, emitting a series of re-echoed 'Harooh's! disappeared into the bush. Within a minute the campong was empty.

'What game is Ryker playing?' Pereira muttered as they stood on the creaking jetty in the dusty moonlight. 'This must be the focus of his authority over the Nambas.' Baffled, they went back to their bunks.

Reaching the margins of the rise, Connolly strolled through a small orchard which had returned to nature, hearing in his mind the exultant roar of Ryker's voice as it had cleaved the midnight jungle. Idly he picked a few of the barely ripe guavas and vividly coloured cajus with their astringent delicately flavoured juice. After spitting away the pith, he searched for a way out of the orchard, but within a few minutes realized that he was lost.

A continuous mound when seen from the distance, the rise was in fact a nexus of small hillocks that formed the residue of a one-time system of ox-bow lakes, and the basins between the slopes were still treacherous with deep mire. Connolly rested his equipment at the foot of a tree. Withdrawing his pistol, he fired two shots into the air in the hope of attracting Ryker and Pereira. He sat down to await his rescue, taking the opportunity to unlatch his monitors and wipe the dials.

After ten minutes no one had appeared. Feeling slightly demoralized, and frightened that the Indians might return and find him, Connolly shouldered his equipment and set off towards the north-west, in the approximate direction of the campong. The ground rose before him. Suddenly, as he turned behind a palisade of wild magnolia trees, he stepped into an open clearing on the crest of the hill.

Squatting on their heels against the tree-trunks and among the tall grass was what seemed to be the entire tribe of the Nambikwaras. They were facing him, their expressions immobile and watchful, eyes like white beads among the sheaves. Presumably they had been sitting in the clearing, only fifty yards away, when he fired his shots, and Connolly had the uncanny feeling that they had been waiting for him to make his entrance exactly at the point he had chosen.

Hesitating, Connolly tightened his grip on the radio monitor. The Indians' faces were like burnished teak, their shoulders painted with a delicate mosaic of earth colours. Noticing the spears held among the grass, Connolly started to walk on across the clearing towards a breach in the palisade of trees.

For a dozen steps the Indians remained motionless. Then, with a chorus of yells, they leapt forward from the grass and surrounded Connolly in a jabbering pack. None of them were more than five feet tall, but their plump agile bodies buffeted him about, almost knocking him off his feet. Eventually the tumult steadied itself, and two or three of the leaders stepped from the cordon and began to scrutinize Connolly more

closely, pinching and fingering him with curious positional movements of the thumb and forefinger, like connoisseurs examining some interesting taxidermic object.

Finally, with a series of high-pitched whines and grunts, the Indians moved off towards the centre of the clearing, propelling Connolly in front of them with sharp slaps on his legs and shoulders, like drovers goading on a large pig. They were all jabbering furiously to each other, some hacking at the grass with their machetes, gathering bundles of leaves in their arms.

Tripping over something in the grass, Connolly stumbled onto his knees. The catch slipped from the lid of the monitor, and as he stood up, fumbling with the heavy cabinet, the revolver slipped from his holster and was lost under his feet in the rush.

Giving way to his panic, he began to shout over the bobbing heads around him, to his surprise heard one of the Indians beside him bellow to the others. Instantly, as the refrain was taken up, the crowd stopped and re-formed its cordon around him. Gasping, Connolly steadied himself, and started to search the trampled grass for his revolver, when he realized that the Indians were now staring, not at himself, but at the exposed counters of the monitor. The six meters were swinging wildly after the stampede across the clearing, and the Indians craned forward, their machetes and spears lowered, gaping at the bobbing needles.

Then there was a roar from the edge of the clearing, and a huge wild-faced man in a straw hat, a shot-gun held like a crow-bar in his hands, stormed in among the Indians, driving them back. Dragging the monitor from his neck, Connolly felt the steadying hand of Captain Pereira take his elbow.

'Lieutenant, Lieutenant,' Pereira murmured reprovingly as they recovered the pistol and made their way back to the campong, the uproar behind them fading among the undergrowth, 'we were nearly in time to say grace.'

Later that afternoon Connolly sat back in a canvas chair on the deck of the launch. About half the Indians had returned, and were wandering about the huts in a desultory manner, kicking at the fires. Ryker, his authority re-asserted, had returned to his bungalow.

'I thought you said they weren't cannibal,' Connolly reminded Pereira.

The Captain snapped his fingers, as if thinking about something more important. 'No, they're not. Stop worrying, Lieutenant, you're not going to end up in a pot.' When Connolly demurred he swung crisply on his heel. He had sharpened up his uniform, and wore his pistol belt and Sam Browne at their regulation position, his peaked cap jutting low over his eyes. Evidently Connolly's close escape had confirmed some private suspicion. 'Look, they're not cannibal in the dietary sense of the term, as used by the Food & Agriculture Organization in its classification of aboriginal peoples. They won't stalk and hunt human game in preference for any other. But –' here the Captain stared fixedly at Connolly '– in

certain circumstances, after a fertility ceremonial, for example, they will eat human flesh. Like all members of primitive communities which are small numerically, the Nambikwara never bury their dead. Instead, they eat them, as a means of conserving the loss and to perpetuate the corporeal identity of the departed. Now do you understand?'

Connolly grimaced. 'I'm glad to know now that I was about to be perpetuated.'

Pereira looked out at the campong. 'Actually they would never eat a white man, to avoid defiling the tribe.' He paused. 'At least, so I've always believed. It's strange, something seems to have . . . Listen, Lieutenant,' he explained, 'I can't quite piece it together, but I'm convinced we should stay here for a few days longer. Various elements make me suspicious, I'm sure Ryker is hiding something. That mound where you were lost is a sort of sacred tumulus, the way the Indians were looking at your instrument made me certain that they'd seen something like it before – perhaps a panel with many flickering dials . . . ?'

'The *Goliath* 7?' Connolly shook his head sceptically. He listened to the undertow of the river drumming dimly against the keel of the launch. 'I doubt it, Captain. I'd like to believe you, but for some reason it doesn't seem very likely.'

'I agree. Some other explanation is preferable. But what? The Indians were squatting on that hill, waiting for someone to arrive. What else could your monitor have reminded them of?'

'Ryker's clock?' Connolly suggested. 'They may regard it as a sort of ju-ju object, like a magical toy.'

'No,' Pereira said categorically. 'These Indians are highly pragmatic, they're not impressed by useless toys. For them to be deterred from killing you means that the equipment you carried possessed some very real, down-to-earth power. Look, suppose the capsule did land here and was secretly buried by Ryker, and that in some way the clocks help him to identify its whereabouts –' here Pereira shrugged hopefully '– it's just possible.'

'Hardly,' Connolly said. 'Besides, Ryker couldn't have buried the capsule himself, and if Colonel Spender had lived through re-entry Ryker would have helped him.'

'I'm not so sure,' Pereira said pensively. 'It would probably strike our friend Mr Ryker as very funny for a man to travel all the way to the Moon and back just to be killed by savages. Much too good a joke to pass over.'

'What religious beliefs do the Indians have?' Connolly asked.

'No religion in the formalized sense of a creed and dogma. They eat their dead so they don't need to invent an after-life in an attempt to re-animate them. In general they subscribe to one of the so-called cargo cults. As I said, they're very material. That's why they're so lazy. Some time in the future they expect a magic galleon or giant bird to arrive carrying an everlasting cornucopia of worldly goods, so they just sit about waiting for

the great day. Ryker encourages them in this idea. It's very dangerous – in some Melanesian islands the tribes with cargo cults have degenerated completely. They lie around all day on the beaches, waiting for the WHO flying boat, or . . .' His voice trailed off.

Connolly nodded and supplied the unspoken thought. 'Or – a space capsule?'

Despite Pereira's growing if muddled conviction that something associated with the missing space-craft was to be found in the area, Connolly was still sceptical. His close escape had left him feeling curiously calm and emotionless, and he looked back on his possible death with fatalistic detachment, identifying it with the total ebb and flow of life in the Amazon forests, with its myriad unremembered deaths, and with the endless vistas of dead trees leaning across the jungle paths radiating from the campong. After only two days the jungle had begun to invest his mind with its own logic, and the possibility of the space-craft landing there seemed more and more remote. The two elements belonged to different systems of natural order, and he found it increasingly difficult to visualize them overlapping. In addition there was a deeper reason for his scepticism, underlined by Ryker's reference to the 'real' reasons for the space-flights. The implication was that the entire space programme was a symptom of some inner unconscious malaise afflicting mankind, and in particular the western technocracies, and that the space-craft and satellites had been launched because their flights satisfied certain buried compulsions and desires. By contrast, in the jungle, where the unconscious was manifest and exposed, there was no need for these insane projections, and the likelihood of the Amazonas playing any part in the success or failure of the space flight became, by a sort of psychological parallax, increasingly blurred and distant, the missing capsule itself a fragment of a huge disintegrating fantasy.

However, he agreed to Pereira's request to borrow the monitors and follow Ryker and the Indians on their midnight romp through the forest.

Once again, after dusk, the same ritual silence descended over the campong, and the Indians took up their positions in the doors of their huts. Like some morose exiled princeling, Ryker sat sprawled on his veranda, one eye on the clock through the window behind him. In the moonlight the scores of moist dark eyes never wavered as they watched him.

At last, half an hour later, Ryker galvanized his great body into life, with a series of tremendous whoops raced off across the campong, leading the stampede into the bush. Away in the distance, faintly outlined by the quarter moon, the shallow hump of the tribal tumulus rose over the black canopy of the jungle. Pereira waited until the last heel beats had subsided, then climbed onto the pier and disappeared among the shadows.

Far away Connolly could hear the faint cries of Ryker's pack as they made off through the bush, the sounds of machetes slashing at the

undergrowth. An ember on the opposite side of the campong flared in the low wind, illuminating the abandoned old man, presumably the former witch doctor, whom he had seen that morning. Beside him was another slimmer figure, the limpid-eyed youth who had followed Connolly about.

A door stirred on Ryker's veranda, providing Connolly with a distant image of the white moonlit back of the river reflected in the mirrors of the mahogany dresser. Connolly watched the door jump lightly against the latch, then walked quietly across the pier to the wooden steps.

A few empty tobacco tins lay about on the shelves around the room, and a stack of empty bottles cluttered one corner behind the door. The ormolu clock had been locked away in the mahogany dresser. After testing the doors, which had been secured with a stout padlock, Connolly noticed a dog-eared paperback book lying on the dresser beside a half-empty carton of cartridges.

On a faded red ground, the small black lettering on the cover was barely decipherable, blurred by the sweat from Ryker's fingers. At first glance it appeared to be a set of logarithm tables. Each of the eighty or so pages was covered with column after column of finely printed numerals and tabular material.

Curious, Connolly carried the manual over to the doorway. The title page was more explicit.

ECHO III
CONSOLIDATED TABLES OF
CELESTIAL TRAVERSES
1965–1980

Published by the National Astronautics and Space Administration, Washington, D.C., 1965. Part XV. Longitude 40-80 West, Latitude 10 North-35 South (South American Sub-Continent) Price 35c.

His interest quickening, Connolly turned the pages. The manual fell open at the section headed: Lat. 5 South, Long, 60 West. He remembered that this was the approximate position of Campos Buros. Tabulated by year, month and day, the columns of figures listed the elevations and compass bearings for sightings of the Echo III satellite, the latest of the huge aluminium spheres which had been orbiting the earth since Echo I was launched in 1959. Rough pencil lines had been drawn through all the entries up to the year 1968. At this point the markings became individual, each minuscule entry crossed off with a small blunt stroke. The pages were grey with the blurred graphite.

Guided by this careful patchwork of cross-hatching, Connolly found the latest entry: March 17, 1978. The time and sighting were. 1-22 *a.m. Elevation 43 degrees WNW, Capella-Eridanus.* Below it was the entry for the next day, an hour later, its orientations differing slightly.

Ruefully shaking his head in admiration of Ryker's cleverness, Connolly looked at his watch. It was about 1.20, two minutes until the next traverse. He glanced at the sky, picking out the constellation Eridanus, from which the satellite would emerge.

So this explained Ryker's hold over the Indians! What more impressive means had a down-and-out white man of intimidating and astonishing a tribe of primitive savages? Armed with nothing more than a set of tables and a reliable clock, he could virtually pinpoint the appearance of the satellite at the first second of its visible traverse. The Indians would naturally be awed and bewildered by this phantom charioteer of the midnight sky, steadily pursuing its cosmic round, like a beacon traversing the profoundest deeps of their own minds. Any powers which Ryker cared to invest in the satellite would seem confirmed by his ability to control the time and place of its arrival.

Connolly realized now how the old alarm clock had told the correct time – by using his tables Ryker had read the exact time off the sky each night. A more accurate clock presumably freed him from the need to spend unnecessary time waiting for the satellite's arrival; he would now be able to set off for the tumulus only a few minutes beforehand.

Walking along the pier he began to search the sky. Away in the distance a low cry sounded into the midnight air, diffusing like a wraith over the jungle. Beside him, sitting on the bows of the launch, Connolly heard the helmsman grunt and point at the sky above the opposite bank. Following the up-raised arm, he quickly found the speeding dot of light. It was moving directly towards the tumulus. Steadily the satellite crossed the sky, winking intermittently as it passed behind lanes of high-altitude cirrus, the conscripted ship of the Nambikwaras' cargo cult.

It was about to disappear among the stars in the south-east when a faint shuffling sound distracted Connolly. He looked down to find the moist-eyed youth, the son of the witch doctor, standing only a few feet away from him, regarding him dolefully.

'Hello, boy,' Connolly greeted him. He pointed at the vanishing satellite. 'See the star?'

The youth made a barely perceptible nod. He hesitated for a moment, his running eyes glowing like drowned moons, then stepped forward and touched Connolly's wristwatch, tapping the dial with his horny fingernail.

Puzzled, Connolly held it up for him to inspect. The youth watched the second hand sweep around the dial, an expression of rapt and ecstatic concentration on his face. Nodding vigorously, he pointed to the sky.

Connolly grinned. 'So you understand? You've rumbled old man Ryker, have you?' He nodded encouragingly to the youth, who was tapping the watch eagerly, apparently in an effort to conjure up a second satellite. Connolly began to laugh. 'Sorry, boy.' He slapped the manual. 'What you really need is this pack of jokers.'

Connolly began to walk back to the bungalow, when the youth darted

forward impulsively and blocked his way, thin legs spread in an aggressive stance. Then, with immense ceremony, he drew from behind his back a round painted object with a glass face that Connolly remembered he had seen him carrying before.

'That looks interesting.' Connolly bent down to examine the object, caught a glimpse in the thin light of a luminous instrument before the youth snatched it away.

'Wait a minute, boy. Let's have another look at that.'

After a pause the pantomime was repeated, but the youth was reluctant to allow Connolly more than the briefest inspection. Again Connolly saw a calibrated dial and a wavering indicator. Then the youth stepped forward and touched Connolly's wrist.

Quickly Connolly unstrapped the metal chain. He tossed the watch to the youth, who instantly dropped the instrument, his barter achieved, and after a delighted yodel turned and darted off among the trees.

Bending down, careful not to touch the instrument with his hands, Connolly examined the dial. The metal housing around it was badly torn and scratched, as if the instrument had been prised from some control panel with a crude implement. But the glass face and the dial beneath it were still intact. Across the centre was the legend:

LUNAR ALTIMETER
Miles: 100
GOLIATH 7
General Electric Corporation,
Schenectedy

Picking up the instrument, Connolly cradled it in his hands. The pressure seals were broken, and the gyro bath floated freely on its air cushion. Like a graceful bird the indicator needle glided up and down the scale.

The pier creaked under approaching footsteps. Connolly looked up at the perspiring figure of Captain Pereira, cap in one hand, monitor dangling from the other.

'My dear Lieutenant!' he panted. 'Wait till I tell you, what a farce, it's fantastic! Do you know what Ryker's doing? – it's so simple it seems unbelievable that no one's thought of it before. It's nothing short of the most magnificent practical *joke*!' Gasping, he sat down on the bale of skins leaning against the gangway. 'I'll give you a clue: Narcissus.'

'Echo,' Connolly replied flatly, still staring at the instrument in his hands.

'You spotted it? Clever boy!' Pereira wiped his cap-band. 'How did you guess? It wasn't that obvious.' He took the manual Connolly handed him. 'What the –? Ah, I see, this makes it even more clear. Of course.' He slapped his knee with the manual. 'You found this in his room? I take my hat off to Ryker,' he continued as Connolly set the altimeter down on

the pier and steadied it carefully. 'Let's face it, it's something of a pretty clever trick. Can you imagine it, he comes here, finds a tribe with a strong cargo cult, opens his little manual and says "Presto, the great white bird will be arriving: *NOW*!'

Connolly nodded, then stood up, wiping his hands on a strip of rattan. When Pereira's laughter had subsided he pointed down to the glowing face of the altimeter at their feet. 'Captain, something else arrived,' he said quietly. 'Never mind Ryker and the satellite. This cargo actually landed.'

As Pereira knelt down and inspected the altimeter, whistling sharply to himself, Connolly walked over to the edge of the pier and looked out across the great back of the silent river at the giant trees which hung over the water, like forlorn mutes at some cataclysmic funeral, their thin silver voices carried away on the dead tide.

Half an hour before they set off the next morning, Connolly waited on the deck for Captain Pereira to conclude his interrogation of Ryker. The empty campong, deserted again by the Indians, basked in the heat, a single plume of smoke curling into the sky. The old witch doctor and his son had disappeared, perhaps to try their skill with a neighbouring tribe, but the loss of his watch was unregretted by Connolly. Down below, safely stowed away among his baggage, was the altimeter, carefully sterilized and sealed. On the table in front of him, no more than two feet from the pistol in his belt, lay Ryker's manual.

For some reason he did not want to see Ryker, despite his contempt for him, and when Pereira emerged from the bungalow he was relieved to see that he was alone. Connolly had decided that he would not return with the search parties when they came to find the capsule; Pereira would serve adequately as a guide.

'Well?'

The Captain smiled wanly. 'Oh, he admitted it, of course.' He sat down on the rail, and pointed to the manual. 'After all, he had no choice. Without that his existence here would be untenable.'

'He admitted that Colonel Spender landed here?'

Pereira nodded. 'Not in so many words, but effectively. The capsule is buried somewhere here – under the tumulus, I would guess. The Indians got hold of Colonel Spender, Ryker claims he could do nothing to help him.'

'That's a lie. He saved me in the bush when the Indians thought I had landed.'

With a shrug Pereira said: 'Your positions were slightly different. Besides, my impression is that Spender was dying anyway, Ryker says the parachute was badly burnt. He probably accepted a *fait accompli*, simply decided to do nothing and hush the whole thing up, incorporating the landing into the cargo cult. Very useful too. He'd been tricking the Indians with the Echo satellite, but sooner or later they would have become impatient. After the *Goliath* crashed, of course, they were prepared to go

on watching the Echo and waiting for the next landing forever.' A faint smile touched his lips. 'It goes without saying that he regards the episode as something of a macabre joke. On you and the whole civilized world.'

A door slammed on the veranda, and Ryker stepped out into the sunlight. Bare-chested and hatless, he strode towards the launch.

'Connolly,' he called down, 'you've got my box of tricks there!'

Connolly reached forward and fingered the manual, the butt of his pistol tapping the table edge. He looked up at Ryker, at his big golden frame bathed in the morning light. Despite his still belligerent tone, a subtle change had come over Ryker. The ironic gleam in his eye had gone, and the inner core of wariness and suspicion which had warped the man and exiled him from the world was now visible. Connolly realized that, curiously, their respective roles had been reversed. He remembered Pereira reminding him that the Indians were at equilibrium with their environment, accepting its constraints and never seeking to dominate the towering arbors of the forest, in a sense of externalization of their own unconscious psyches. Ryker had upset that equilibrium, and by using the Echo satellite had brought the 20th century and its psychopathic projections into the heart of the Amazonian deep, transforming the Indians into a community of superstitious and materialistic sightseers, their whole culture oriented around the mythical god of the puppet star. It was Connolly who now accepted the jungle for what it was, seeing himself and the abortive space-flight in this fresh perspective.

Pereira gestured to the helmsman, and with a muffled roar the engine started. The launch pulled lightly against its lines.

'Connolly!' Ryker's voice was shriller now, his bellicose shout overlaid by a higher note. For a moment the two men looked at each other, and in the eyes above him Connolly glimpsed the helpless isolation of Ryker, his futile attempt to identify himself with the forest.

Picking up the manual, Connolly leaned forward and tossed it through the air on to the pier. Ryker tried to catch it, then knelt down and picked it up before it slipped through the springing poles. Still kneeling, he watched as the lines were cast off and the launch surged ahead.

They moved out into the channel and plunged through the bowers of spray into the heavier swells of the open current.

As they reached a sheltering bend and the figure of Ryker faded for the last time among the creepers and sunlight, Connolly turned to Pereira. 'Captain – what actually happened to Colonel Spender? You said the Indians wouldn't eat a white man.'

'They eat their gods,' Pereira said.

1963

THE TIME-TOMBS

ONE

Usually in the evenings, while Traxel and Bridges drove off into the sand-sea, Shepley and the Old Man would wander among the gutted time-tombs, listening to them splutter faintly in the dying light as they recreated their fading personas, the deep crystal vaults flaring briefly like giant goblets.

Most of the tombs on the southern edge of the sand-sea had been stripped centuries earlier. But Shepley liked to saunter through the straggle of half-submerged pavilions, the ancient sand playing over his bare feet like wavelets on an endless beach. Alone among the flickering tombs, with the empty husks of the past ten thousand years, he could temporarily forget his nagging sense of failure.

Tonight, however, he would have to forego the walk. Traxel, who was nominally the leader of the group of tomb-robbers, had pointedly warned him at dinner that he must pay his way or leave. For three weeks Shepley had put off going with Traxel and Bridges, making a series of progressively lamer excuses, and they had begun to get impatient with him. The Old Man they would tolerate, for his vast knowledge of the sand-sea – he had combed the decaying tombs for over forty years and knew every reef and therm-pool like the palm of his hand – and because he was an institution that somehow dignified the lowly calling of tomb-robber, but Shepley had been there for only three months and had nothing to offer except his morose silences and self-hate.

'Tonight, Shepley,' Traxel told him firmly in his hard clipped voice, 'you must find a tape. We cannot support you indefinitely. Remember, we're all as eager to leave Vergil as you are.'

Shepley nodded, watching his reflection in the gold finger-bowl. Traxel sat at the head of the tilting table, his high-collared velvet jacket unbuttoned. Surrounded by the battered gold plate filched from the tombs, red wine spilling across the table from Bridges' tankard, he looked more like a Renaissance princeling than a cashiered PhD. Once Traxel had been a Professor of Semantics, and Shepley wondered what scandal had brought him to Vergil. Now, like a grave-rat, he hunted the time-tombs with Bridges, selling the tapes to the Psycho-History Museums at a dollar a foot. Shepley found it impossible to come to terms with the tall, aloof

man. By contrast Bridges, who was just a thug, had a streak of blunt good humour that made him tolerable, but with Traxel he could never relax. Perhaps his coldly abrupt manner represented authority, the high-faced, stern-eyed interrogators who still pursued Shepley in his dreams.

Bridges kicked back his chair and lurched away around the table, pounding Shepley across the shoulders.

'You come with us, kid. Tonight we'll find a megatape.'

Outside, the low-hulled, camouflaged half-track waited in a saddle between two dunes. The old summer palace was sinking slowly below the desert, and the floor of the banqueting hall shelved into the white sand like the deck of a subsiding liner, going down with lights blazing from its staterooms.

'What about you, Doctor?' Traxel asked the Old Man as Bridges swung aboard the half-track and the exhaust kicked out. 'It would be a pleasure to have you along.' When the Old Man shook his head Traxel turned to Shepley. 'Well, are you coming?'

'Not tonight,' Shepley demurred hurriedly. 'I'll walk down to the tomb-beds later myself.'

'Twenty miles?' Traxel reminded him, watching reflectively. 'Very well.' He zipped up his jacket and strode away towards the half-track. As they moved off he shouted 'Shepley, I meant what I said!'

Shepley watched them disappear among the dunes. Flatly, he repeated 'He means what he says.'

The Old Man shrugged, sweeping the sand off the table. 'Traxel . . . he's a difficult man. What are you going to do?' The note of reproach in his voice was mild, realizing that Shepley's motives were the same as those which had marooned himself on the lost beaches of the sand-sea four decades earlier.

Shepley snapped irritably. 'I can't go with him. After five minutes he drains me like a skull. What's the matter with Traxel? Why is he here?'

The Old Man stood up, staring out vaguely into the desert. 'I can't remember. Everyone has his own reasons. After a while the stories overlap.'

They walked out under the portico, following the grooves left by the half-track. A mile away, winding between the last of the lavalakes which marked the southern shore of the sand-sea, they could just see the vehicle vanishing into the darkness. The old tomb-beds, where Shepley and the Old Man usually walked, lay between them, the pavilions arranged in three lines along a low basaltic ridge. Occasionally a brief flare of light flickered up into the white, bone-like darkness, but most of the tombs were silent.

Shepley stopped, hands falling limply to his sides. 'The new beds are by the Lake of Newton, nearly twenty miles away. I can't follow them.'

'I shouldn't try,' the Old Man rejoined. 'There was a big sand-storm last night. The time-wardens will be out in force marking any new tombs

uncovered.' He chuckled softly to himself. 'Traxel and Bridges won't find a foot of tape – they'll be lucky if they're not arrested.' He took off his white cotton hat and squinted shrewdly through the dead light, assessing the altered contours of the dunes, then guided Shepley towards the old mono-rail whose southern terminus ended by the tomb-beds. Once it had been used to transport the pavilions from the station on the northern shore of the sand-sea, and a small gyro-car still leaned against the freight platform. 'We'll go over to Pascal. Something may have come up, you never know.'

Shepley shook his head. 'Traxel took me there when I first arrived. They've all been stripped a hundred times.'

'Well, we'll have a look.' The Old Man plodded on towards the mono-rail, his dirty white suit flapping in the low breeze. Behind them the summer palace – built three centuries earlier by a business tycoon from Ceres – faded into the darkness, the rippling glass tiles in the upper spires merging into the starlight.

Propping the car against the platform, Shepley wound up the gyroscope, then helped the Old Man on to the front seat. He prised off a piece of rusting platform rail and began to punt the car away. Every fifty yards or so they stopped to clear the sand that submerged the track, but slowly they wound off among the dunes and lakes. Here and there the onion-shaped cupola of a solitary time-tomb reared up into the sky beside them, fragments of the crystal casements twinkling in the sand like minuscule stars.

Half an hour later, as they rode down the final long incline towards the Lake of Pascal, Shepley went forward to sit beside the Old Man, who emerged from his private reverie to ask pointedly, 'And you, Shepley, why are you here?'

Shepley leaned back, letting the cool air drain the sweat off his face. 'Once I tried to kill someone,' he explained tersely. 'After they cured me I found I wanted to kill myself instead.' He reached down to the hand-brake as they gathered speed. 'For ten thousand dollars I can go back on probation. Here I thought there would be a freemasonry of sorts. But then you've been kind enough, Doctor.'

'Don't worry, we'll get you a winning tape.' He leaned forward, shielding his eyes from the stellar glare, gazing down at the little cantonment of gutted time-tombs on the shore of the lake. In all there were about a dozen pavilions, their roofs holed, the group Traxel had shown to Shepley after his arrival when he demonstrated how the vaults were robbed.

'Shepley! Look, lad!'

'Where? I've seen them before, Doctor. They're stripped.'

The Old Man pushed him away. 'No, you fool. Three hundred yards to the west, by the long ridge where the big dunes have moved. Can you see them now?' He drummed a white fist on Shepley's knee. 'You've made it, lad. You won't need to be frightened of Traxel or anyone else.'

Shepley jerked the car to a halt. As he ran ahead of the Old Man towards the escarpment he could see several of the time-tombs glowing along the sky lines, emerging briefly from the dark earth like the tents of a spectral caravan.

TWO

For ten millennia the Sea of Vergil had served as a burial ground, and the 1,500 square miles of restless sand were estimated to contain over twenty thousand tombs. All but a minute fraction had been stripped by the successive generations of tomb-robbers, and an intact spool of the 17th Dynasty could now be sold to the Psycho-History Museum at Tycho for over 3,000 dollars. For each preceding dynasty, though none older than the 12th had ever been found, there was a bonus.

There were no corpses in the time-tombs, no dusty skeletons. The cyber-architectonic ghosts which haunted them were embalmed in the metallic codes of memory tapes, three-dimensional molecular transcriptions of their living originals, stored among the dunes as a stupendous act of faith, in the hope that one day the physical re-creation of the coded personalities would be possible. After five thousand years the attempt had been reluctantly abandoned, but out of respect for the tomb-builders their pavilions were left to take their own hazard with time in the Sea of Vergil. Later the tomb-robbers had arrived, as the historians of the new epochs realized the enormous archives that lay waiting for them in this antique limbo. Despite the time-wardens, the pillaging of the tombs and the illicit traffic in dead souls continued.

'Doctor! Come on! Look at them!'

Shepley plunged wildly up to his knees in the silver-white sand, diving from one pavilion to the next like a frantic puppy.

Smiling to himself, the Old Man climbed slowly up the melting slope, submerged to his waist as the fine crystals poured away around him, feeling for spurs of firmer rock. The cupola of the nearest tomb tilted into the sky, only the top six inches of the casements visible below the overhang. He sat for a moment on the roof, watching Shepley dive about in the darkness, then peered through the casement, brushing away the sand with his hands.

The tomb was intact. Inside he could see the votive light burning over the altar, the hexagonal nave with its inlaid gold floor and drapery, the narrow chancel at the rear which held the memory store. Low tables surrounded the chancel, carrying beaten goblets and gold bowls, token offerings intended to distract any pillager who stumbled upon the tomb.

Shepley came leaping over to him. 'Let's get into them, Doctor! What are we waiting for?'

The Old Man looked out over the plain below, at the cluster of stripped tombs by the edge of the lake, at the dark ribbon of the gyro-rail winding away among the hills. The thought of the fortune that lay at his fingertips left him unmoved. For so long now he had lived among the tombs that he had begun to assume something of their ambience of immortality and timelessness, and Shepley's impatience seemed to come out of another dimension. He hated stripping the tombs. Each one robbed represented, not just the final extinction of a surviving personality, but a diminution of his own sense of eternity. Whenever a new tomb-bed emerged from the sand he felt something within himself momentarily rekindled, not hope, for he was beyond that, but a serene acceptance of the brief span of time left to him.

'Right,' he nodded. They began to cleave away the sand piled around the door, Shepley driving it down the slope where it spilled in a white foam over the darker basaltic chips. When the narrow portico was free the Old Man squatted by the timeseal. His fingers cleaned away the crystals embedded between the tabs, then played lightly over them.

Like dry sticks breaking, an ancient voice crackled

Orion, Betelgeuse, Altair,
What twice-born star shall be my heir,
Doomed again to be this scion –

'Come on, Doctor, this is a quicker way.' Shepley put one leg up against the door and lunged against it futilely. The Old Man pushed him away. With his mouth close to the seal, he rejoined.

'Of Altair, Betelgeuse, Orion.'

As the doors accepted this and swung back he murmured:

'Don't despise the old rituals. Now, let's see.' They paused in the cool, unbreathed air, the votive light throwing a pale ruby glow over the gold drapes parting across the chancel.

The air became curiously hazy and mottled. Within a few seconds it began to vibrate with increasing rapidity, and a succession of vivid colours rippled across the surface of what appeared to be a cone of light projected from the rear of the chancel. Soon this resolved itself into a three-dimensional image of an elderly man in a blue robe.

Although the image was transparent, the brilliant electric blue of the robe revealing the inadequacies of the projection system, the intensity of the illusion was such that Shepley almost expected the man to speak to them. He was well into his seventies, with a composed, watchful face and thin grey hair, his hands resting quietly in front of him. The edge of the desk was just visible, the proximal arc of the cone enclosing part of a silver inkstand and a small metal trophy. These details, and the spectral

bookshelves and paintings which formed the backdrop of the illusion, were of infinite value to the Psycho-History institutes, providing evidence of the earlier civilizations far more reliable than the funerary urns and goblets in the anteroom.

Shepley began to move forward, the definition of the persona fading slightly. A visual relay of the memory store, it would continue to play after the code had been removed, though the induction coils would soon exhaust themselves. Then the tomb would be finally extinct.

Two feet away, the wise unblinking eyes of the long dead magnate stared at him steadily, his seamed forehead like a piece of pink transparent wax. Tentatively, Shepley reached out and plunged his hand into the cone, the myriad vibration patterns racing across his wrist. For a moment he held the dead man's face in his hand, the edge of the desk and the silver inkstand dappling across his sleeve.

Then he stepped forward and walked straight through him into the darkness at the rear of the chancel.

Quickly, following Traxel's instructions, he unbolted the console containing the memory store, lifting out the three heavy drums which held the tape spools. Immediately the persona began to dim, the edge of the desk and the bookshelves vanishing as the cone contracted. Narrow bands of dead air appeared across it, one, at the level of the man's neck, decapitating him. Lower down the scanner had begun to misfire. The folded hands trembled nervously, and now and then one of his shoulders gave a slight twitch. Shepley stepped through him without looking back.

The Old Man was waiting outside. Shepley dropped the drums on to the sand. 'They're heavy,' he muttered. Brightening, he added. 'There must be over five hundred feet here, Doctor. With the bonus, and all the others as well –' He took the Old Man's arm. 'Come on, let's get into the next one.'

The Old Man disengaged himself, watching the sputtering persona in the pavilion, the blue light from the dead man's suit pulsing across the sand like a soundless lightning storm.

'Wait a minute, lad, don't run away with yourself.' As Shepley began to slide off through the sand, sending further falls down the slope, he added in a firmer voice 'And stop moving all that sand around! These tombs have been hidden for ten thousand years. Don't undo all the good work, or the wardens will find them the first time they go past.'

'Or Traxel,' Shepley said, sobering quickly. He glanced around the lake below, searching the shadows among the tombs in case anyone was watching them, waiting to seize the treasure.

THREE

The Old Man left him at the door of the next pavilion, reluctant to watch the tomb being stripped of the last vestige of its already meagre claim to immortality.

'This will be our last one tonight,' he told Shepley. 'You'll never hide all these tapes from Bridges and Traxel.'

The furnishings of the tomb differed from that of the previous one. Sombre black marble panels covered the walls, inscribed with strange gold-leaf hieroglyphs, and the inlays in the floor represented stylized astrological symbols, at once eerie and obscure. Shepley leaned against the altar, watching the cone of light reach out towards him from the chancel as the curtains parted. The predominant colours were gold and carmine, mingled with a vivid powdery copper that gradually resolved itself into the huge, harp-like head-dress of a reclining woman. She lay in the centre of what seemed to be a sphere of softly luminous gas, inclined against a massive black catafalque, from the sides of which flared two enormous heraldic wings. The woman's copper hair was swept straight back from her forehead, some five or six feet long, and merged with the plumage of the wings, giving her an impression of tremendous contained speed, like a goddess arrested in a moment of flight on a cornice of some great temple-city of the dead.

Her eyes stared forward expressionlessly at Shepley. Her arms and shoulders were bare, and the white skin, like compacted snow, had a brilliant surface sheen, the reflected light glaring against the black base of the catafalque and the long sheath-like gown that swept around her hips to the floor. Her face, like an exquisite porcelain mask, was tilted upward slightly, the half-closed eyes suggesting that the woman was asleep or dreaming. No background had been provided for the image, but the bowl of luminescence invested the persona with immense power and mystery.

Shepley heard the Old Man shuffle up behind him.

'Who is she, Doctor? A princess?'

The Old Man shook his head slowly. 'You can only guess. I don't know. There are strange treasures in these tombs. Get on with it, we'd best be going.'

Shepley hesitated. He started to walk towards the woman on the catafalque, and then felt the enormous upward surge of her flight, the pressure of all the past centuries carried before her brought to a sudden focus in front of him, holding him back like a physical barrier.

'Doctor!' He reached the door just behind the Old Man. 'We'll leave this one, there's no hurry!'

The Old Man examined his face shrewdly in the moonlight, the brilliant colours of the persona flickering across Shepley's youthful cheeks. 'I know how you feel, lad, but remember, the woman doesn't exist, any more than a painting. You'll have to come back for her soon.'

Shepley nodded quickly. 'I know, but some other night. There's something uncanny about this tomb.' He closed the doors behind them, and immediately the huge cone of light shrank back into the chancel, sucking the woman and the catafalque into the darkness. The wind swept across the dunes, throwing a fine spray of sand on to the half-buried cupolas, sighing among the wrecked tombs.

The Old Man made his way down to the mono-rail, and waited for Shepley as he worked for the next hour, slowly covering each of the tombs.

On the Old Man's recommendation he gave Traxel only one of the canisters, containing about 500 feet of tape. As prophesied, the time-wardens had been out in force in the Sea of Newton, and two members of another gang had been caught red-handed. Bridges was in foul temper, but Traxel, as ever self-contained, seemed unworried at the wasted evening.

Straddling the desk in the tilting ballroom, he examined the drum with interest, complimenting Shepley on his initiative. 'Excellent, Shepley. I'm glad you joined us now. Do you mind telling me where you found this?'

Shepley shrugged vaguely, began to mumble something about a secret basement in one of the gutted tombs nearby, but the Old Man cut in: 'Don't broadcast it everywhere! Traxel, you shouldn't ask questions like that – he's got his own living to earn.'

Traxel smiled, sphinx-like. 'Right again, Doctor.' He tapped the smooth untarnished case. 'In mint condition, and a 15th Dynasty too.'

'Tenth!' Shepley claimed indignantly, frightened that Traxel might try to pocket the bonus. The Old Man cursed, and Traxel's eyes gleamed.

'Tenth, is it? I didn't realize there were any 10th Dynasty tombs still intact. You surprise me, Shepley. Obviously you have concealed talents.'

Luckily he seemed to assume that the Old Man had been hoarding the tape for years.

Face down in a shallow hollow at the edge of the ridge, Shepley watched the white-hulled sand-car of the time-wardens shunt through the darkness by the old cantonment. Directly below him jutted the spires of the newly discovered tomb-bed, invisible against the dark background of the ridge. The two wardens in the sand-car were more interested in the old tombs; they had spotted the gyro-car lying on its side by the mono-rail, and guessed that the gangs had been working the ruins over again. One of them stood on the running board, flicking a torch into the gutted pavilions. Crossing the mono-rail, the car moved off slowly across the lake to the north-west, a low pall of dust settling behind it.

For a few moments Shepley lay quietly in the slack darkness, watching the gullies and ravines that led into the lake, then slid down among the pavilions. Brushing away the sand to reveal a square wooden plank, he slipped below it into the portico.

As the golden image of the enchantress loomed out of the black-walled chancel to greet him, the great reptilian wings unfurling around her, he stood behind one of the columns in the nave, fascinated by her strange deathless beauty. At times her luminous face seemed almost repellent, but he had nonetheless seized on the faint possibility of her resurrection.

Each night he came, stealing into the tomb where she had lain for ten thousand years, unable to bring himself to interrupt her. The long copper hair streamed behind her like an entrained time-wind, her angled body in flight between two infinitely distant universes, where archetypal beings of superhuman stature glimmered fitfully in their own self-generated light.

Two days later Bridges discovered the remainder of the drums.

'Traxel! Traxel!' he bellowed, racing across the inner courtyard from the entrance to one of the disused bunkers. He bounded into the ballroom and slammed the metal cans on to the computer which Traxel was programming. 'Take a look at these – more Tenths! The whole place is crawling with them!'

Traxel weighed the cans idly in his hands, glancing across at Shepley and the Old Man, on lookout duty by the window. 'Interesting. Where did you find them?'

Shepley jumped down from the window trestle. 'They're mine. The Doctor will confirm it. They run in sequence after the first I gave you a week ago. I was storing them.'

Bridges cut back with an oath. 'Whaddya mean, storing them? Is that your personal bunker out there? Since when?' He shoved Shepley away with a broad hand and swung round on Traxel. 'Listen, Traxel, those tapes were a fair find. I don't see any tags on them. Every time I bring something in I'm going to have this kid claim it?'

Traxel stood up, adjusting his height so that he overreached Bridges. 'Of course, you're right – technically. But we have to work together, don't we? Shepley made a mistake, we'll forgive him this time.' He handed the drums to Shepley, Bridges seething with barely controlled indignation. 'If I were you, Shepley, I'd get those cashed. Don't worry about flooding the market.' As Shepley turned away, sidestepping Bridges, he called him back. 'And there are advantages in working together, you know.'

He watched Shepley disappear to his room, then turned to survey the huge peeling map of the sand-sea that covered the facing wall.

'You'll have to strip the tombs now,' the Old Man told Shepley later. 'It's obvious you've stumbled on something, and it won't take Traxel five minutes to discover where.'

'Perhaps a little longer,' Shepley replied evenly. They stepped out of the shadow of the palace and moved away among the dunes; Bridges and Traxel were watching them from the dining-room table, their figures motionless in the light. 'The roofs are almost covered now. The next sandstorm should bury them for good.'

'Have you entered any of the other tombs?'

Shepley shook his head vigorously. 'Believe me, Doctor, I know now why the time-wardens are here. As long as there's a chance of their coming to life we're committing murder every time we rob a tomb. Even if it's only one chance in a million it may be all they bargained on. After all,

we don't commit suicide because the chances of life existing anywhere are virtually nil.'

Already he had come to believe that the enchantress might suddenly resurrect herself, step down from the catafalque before his eyes. While a slender possibility existed of her returning to life he felt that he too had a valid foothold in existence, that there was a small element of certainty in what had previously seemed a random and utterly meaningless universe.

FOUR

As the first dawn light probed through the casements, Shepley turned reluctantly from the nave. He looked back briefly at the glowing persona, suppressing the slight pang of disappointment that the expected metamorphosis had not yet occurred, but relieved to have spent as much time awaiting it as possible.

He made his way down to the old cantonment, steering carefully through the shadows. As he reached the mono-rail – he now made the journey on foot, to prevent Traxel guessing that the cache lay along the route of the rail – he heard the track hum faintly in the cool air. He jumped back behind a low mound, tracing its winding pathway through the dunes.

Suddenly an engine throbbed out behind him, and Traxel's camouflaged half-track appeared over the edge of the ridge. Its front four wheels raced and spun, and the huge vehicle tipped forward and plunged down the incline among the buried tombs, its surging tracks dislodging tons of the fine sand Shepley had so laboriously pushed by hand up the slope. Immediately several of the pavilions appeared to view, the white dust cascading off their cupolas.

Half-buried in the avalanche they had set off, Traxel and Bridges leapt from the driving cab, pointing to the pavilions and shouting at each other. Shepley darted forward, and put his foot up on the mono-rail just as it began to vibrate loudly.

In the distance the gyro-car slowly approached, the Old Man punting it along, hatless and dishevelled.

He reached the tomb as Bridges was kicking the door in with a heavy boot, Traxel behind him with a bag full of wrenches.

'Hello, Shepley!' Traxel greeted him gaily. 'So this is your treasure trove.'

Shepley staggered splay-legged through the sliding sand, and brushed past Traxel as glass spattered from the window. He flung himself on Bridges and pulled the big man backwards.

'Bridges, this one's mine! Try any of the others; you can have them all!'

Bridges jerked himself to his feet, staring down angrily at Shepley. Traxel peered suspiciously at the other tombs, their porticos still flooded with

sand. 'What's so interesting about this one, Shepley?' he asked sardonically. Bridges roared and slammed a boot into the casement, knocking out one of the panels. Shepley dived on to his shoulders, and Bridges snarled and flung him against the wall. Before Shepley could duck he swung a heavy left cross to Shepley's mouth, knocking him back on to the sand with a bloody face.

Traxel roared with amusement as Shepley lay there stunned, then knelt down, sympathetically examining Shepley's face in the light thrown by the expanding persona within the tomb. Bridges whooped with surprise, gaping like a startled ape at the sumptuous golden mirage of the enchantress.

'How did you find me?' Shepley muttered thickly. 'I double-tracked a dozen times.'

Traxel smiled. 'We didn't follow you, chum. We followed the rail.' He pointed down at the silver thread of the metal strip, plainly visible in the dawn light almost ten miles away. 'The gyro-car cleaned the rail. It led us straight here. Ah, hello, Doctor,' he greeted the Old Man as he climbed the slope and slumped down wearily beside Shepley. 'I take it we have you to thank for all this. Don't worry, Doctor, I shan't forget you.'

'Many thanks,' the Old Man said flatly. He helped Shepley to sit up, frowning at his split lips. 'Aren't you taking everything too seriously, Traxel? You're becoming crazed with greed. Let the boy have this tomb. There are plenty more.'

The patterns of light across the sand dimmed and broke as Bridges plunged through the persona towards the rear of the chancel. Weakly Shepley tried to stand up, but the Old Man held him back. Traxel shrugged. 'Too late, Doctor.' He looked over his shoulder at the persona, ruefully shaking his head in acknowledgment of its magnificence. 'These 10th Dynasty graves are stupendous. But there's something curious about this one.'

He was still staring at it reflectively a minute later when Bridges emerged.

'Boy, that was a crazy one, Traxel! For a second I thought it was a dud.' He handed the three canisters to Traxel, who weighed two of them in one hand against the other. Bridges added 'Kinda light, aren't they?'

Traxel began to prise them open with a wrench. 'Are you certain there are no more in there?'

'Hundred per cent. Have a look yourself.'

Two of the cans were empty, the tape spools missing. The third was only half full, a mere three-inch width of tape in its centre. Bridges bellowed in pain: 'The kid robbed us. I can't believe it!' Traxel waved him away and went over to the Old Man, who was staring in at the now flickering persona. The two men exchanged glances, then nodded slowly in confirmation. With a short laugh Traxel kicked at the can containing the half reel of tape, jerking the spool out on to the sand, where it began

to unravel in the quietly moving air. Bridges protested but Traxel shook his head.

'It *is* a dud. Go and have a close look at the image.' When Bridges peered at it blankly he explained 'The woman there was dead when the matrices were recorded. She's beautiful all right – as poor Shepley here discovered – but it's all too literally skin deep. That's why there's only half a can of data. No nervous system, no musculature or internal organs – just a beautiful golden husk. This is a mortuary tomb. If you resurrected her you'd have an ice-cold corpse on your hands.'

'But why?' Bridges rasped. 'What's the point?'

Traxel gestured expansively. 'It's immortality of a kind. Perhaps she died suddenly, and this was the next best thing. When the Doctor first came here there were a lot of mortuary tombs of young children being found. If I remember he had something of a reputation for always leaving them intact. A typical piece of highbrow sentimentality – giving immortality only to the dead. Agree, Doctor?'

Before the Old Man could reply a voice shouted from below, there was a nearby roaring hiss of an ascending signal rocket and a vivid red star-shell burst over the lake below, spitting incandescent fragments over them. Traxel and Bridges leapt forwards, saw two men in a sand-car pointing up at them, and three more vehicles converging across the lake half a mile away.

'The time-wardens!' Traxel shouted. Bridges picked up the tool bag and the two men raced across the slope towards the half-track, the Old Man hobbling after them. He turned back to wait for Shepley, who was still sitting on the ground where he had fallen, watching the image inside the pavilion.

'Shepley! Come on, lad, pull yourself together! You'll get ten years!'

When Shepley made no reply he reached up to the side of the half-track as Traxel reversed it expertly out of the morraine of sand, letting Bridges swing him aboard. 'Shepley!' he called again. Traxel hesitated, then roared away as a second star-shell exploded.

Shepley tried to reach the tape, but the stampeding feet had severed it at several points, and the loose ends, which he had numbly thought of trying to reinsert into the projector, now fluttered around him in the sand. Below, he could hear the sounds of flight and pursuit, the warning crack of a rifle, engines baying and plunging, as Traxel eluded the time-wardens, but he kept his eyes fixed on the image within the tomb. Already it had begun to fragment, fading against the mounting sunlight. Getting slowly to his feet, he entered the tomb and closed the battered doors.

Still magnificent upon her bier, the enchantress lay back between the great wings. Motionless for so long, she had at last been galvanized into life, and a jerking syncopated rhythm rippled through her body. The wings shook uneasily, and a series of tremors disturbed the base of the catafalque, so that the woman's feet danced an exquisitely flickering minuet, the toes

darting from side to side with untiring speed. Higher up, her wide smooth hips jostled each other in a jaunty mock tango.

He watched until only the face remained, a few disconnected traces of the wings and catafalque jerking faintly in the darkness, then made his way out of the tomb.

Outside, in the cool morning light, the time-wardens were waiting for him, hands on the hips of their white uniforms. One was holding the empty canisters, turning the fluttering strands of tape over with his foot as they drifted away.

The other took Shepley's arm and steered him down to the car.

'Traxel's gang,' he said to the driver. 'This must be a new recruit.' He glanced dourly at the blood around Shepley's mouth. 'Looks as if they've been fighting over the spoils.'

The driver pointed to the three drums. 'Stripped?'

The man carrying them nodded. 'All three. And they were 10th Dynasty.' He shackled Shepley's wrists to the dashboard. 'Too bad, son, you'll be doing ten yourself soon. It'll seem like ten thousand.'

'Unless it was a dud,' the driver rejoined, eyeing Shepley with some sympathy. 'You know, one of those freak mortuary tombs.'

Shepley straightened his bruised mouth. 'It wasn't,' he said firmly.

The driver glanced warningly at the other wardens. 'What about the tape blowing away up there?'

Shepley looked up at the tomb spluttering faintly below the ridge, its light almost gone. 'That's just the persona,' he said. 'The empty skin.'

As the engine surged forward he listened to three empty drums hit the floor behind the seat.

1963

NOW WAKES THE SEA

Again at night Mason heard the sounds of the approaching sea, the muffled thunder of breakers rolling up the near-by streets. Roused from his sleep, he ran out into the moonlight, where the white-framed houses stood like sepulchres among the washed concrete courts. Two hundred yards away the waves plunged and boiled, sluicing in and out across the pavement. Foam seethed through the picket fences, and the broken spray filled the air with the wine-sharp tang of brine.

Off-shore the deeper swells of the open sea rode across the roofs of the submerged houses, the white-caps cleft by isolated chimneys. Leaping back as the cold foam stung his feet, Mason glanced at the house where his wife lay sleeping. Each night the sea moved a few yards nearer, a hissing guillotine across the empty lawns.

For half an hour Mason watched the waves vault among the rooftops. The luminous surf cast a pale nimbus on the clouds racing overhead on the dark wind, and covered his hands with a waxy sheen.

At last the waves began to recede, and the deep bowl of illuminated water withdrew down the emptying streets, disgorging the lines of houses in the moonlight. Mason ran forwards across the expiring bubbles, but the sea shrank away from him, disappearing around the corners of the houses, sliding below the garage doors. He sprinted to the end of the road as a last glow was carried across the sky beyond the spire of the church. Exhausted, Mason returned to his bed, the sound of the dying waves filling his head as he slept.

'I saw the sea again last night,' he told his wife at breakfast.

Quietly, Miriam said: 'Richard, the nearest sea is a thousand miles away.' She watched her husband for a moment, her pale fingers straying to the coil of black hair lying against her neck. 'Go out into the drive and look. There's no sea.'

'Darling, I *saw* it.'

'Richard –!'

Mason stood up, and with slow deliberation raised his palms. 'Miriam, I felt the spray on my hands. The waves were breaking around my feet. I wasn't dreaming.'

'You must have been.' Miriam leaned against the door, as if trying to exclude the strange nightworld of her husband. With her long raven hair framing her oval face, and the scarlet dressing-gown open to reveal her slender neck and white breast, she reminded Mason of a Pre-Raphaelite

heroine in an Arthurian pose. 'Richard, you must see Dr Clifton. It's beginning to frighten me.'

Mason smiled, his eyes searching the distant rooftops above the trees. 'I shouldn't worry. What's happening is really very simple. At night I hear the sounds of the sea, I go out and watch the waves in the moonlight, and then come back to bed.' He paused, a flush of fatigue on his face. Tall and slimly built, Mason was still convalescing from the illness which had kept him at home for the previous six months. 'It's curious, though,' he resumed, 'the water is remarkably luminous. I should guess its salinity is well above normal –'

'But Richard . . .' Miriam looked around helplessly, her husband's calmness exhausting her. 'The sea isn't *there*; it's only in your mind. No one else can see it.'

Mason nodded, hands lost in his pockets. 'Perhaps no one else has heard it yet.'

Leaving the breakfast-room, he went into his study. The couch on which he had slept during his illness still stood against the corner, his bookcase beside it. Mason sat down, taking a large fossil mollusc from a shelf. During the winter, when he had been confined to bed, the smooth trumpet-shaped conch, with its endless associations of ancient seas and drowned strands, had provided him with unlimited pleasure, a bottomless cornucopia of image and reverie. Cradling it reassuringly in his hands, as exquisite and ambiguous as a fragment of Greek sculpture found in a dry riverbed, he reflected that it seemed like a capsule of time, the condensation of another universe. He could almost believe that the midnight sea which haunted his sleep had been released from the shell when he had inadvertently scratched one of its helixes.

Miriam followed him into the room and briskly drew the curtains, as if aware that Mason was returning to the twilight world of his sick-bed. She took his shoulders in her hands.

'Richard, listen. Tonight, when you hear the waves, wake me and we'll go out together.'

Gently, Mason disengaged himself. 'Whether you see it or not is irrelevant, Miriam. The fact is that I see it.'

Later, walking down the street, Mason reached the point where he had stood the previous night, watching the waves break and roll towards him. The sounds of placid domestic activity came from the houses he had seen submerged. The grass on the lawns was bleached by the July heat, and sprays rotated in the bright sunlight, casting rainbows in the vivid air. Undisturbed since the rainstorms in the early spring, the long summer's dust lay between the wooden fences and water hydrants.

The street, one of a dozen suburban boulevards on the perimeter of the town, ran north-west for some three hundred yards and then joined the open square of the neighbourhood shopping centre. Mason shielded his eyes and looked out at the clock tower of the library and the church

spire, identifying the protuberances which had risen from the steep swells of the open sea. All were in exactly the positions he remembered.

The road shelved slightly as it approached the shopping centre, and by a curious coincidence marked the margins of the beach which would have existed if the area had been flooded. A mile or so from the town, this shallow ridge, which formed part of the rim of a large natural basin enclosing the alluvial plain below, culminated in a small chalk outcropping. Although it was partly hidden by the intervening houses, Mason now recognized it clearly as the promontory which had reared like a citadel above the sea. The deep swells had rolled against its flanks, sending up immense plumes of spray that fell back with almost hypnotic slowness upon the receding water. At night the promontory seemed larger and more gaunt, an uneroded bastion against the sea. One evening, Mason promised himself, he would go out to the promontory and let the waves wake him as he slept on the peak.

A car moved past, the driver watching Mason curiously as he stood in the middle of the road, head raised to the air. Not wishing to appear any more eccentric than he was already considered – the solitary, abstracted husband of the beautiful but childless Mrs Mason – Mason turned into the avenue which ran along the ridge. As he approached the distant outcropping he glanced over the hedges for any signs of water-logged gardens or stranded cars. The houses had been inundated by the floodwater.

The first visions of the sea had come to Mason only three weeks earlier, but he was already convinced of their absolute validity. He recognized that after its nightly withdrawal the water failed to leave any mark on the hundreds of houses it submerged, and he felt no alarm for the drowned people who were sleeping undisturbed in the sea's immense liquid locker as he watched the luminous waves break across the roof-tops. Despite this paradox, it was his complete conviction of the sea's reality that had made him admit to Miriam that he had woken one night to the sound of waves outside the window and gone out to find the sea rolling across the neighbourhood streets and houses. At first she had merely smiled at him, accepting this illustration of his strange private world. Then, three nights later, she had woken to the sound of him latching the door on his return, bewildered by his pumping chest and perspiring face.

From then on she spent all day looking over her shoulder through the window for any signs of the sea. What worried her as much as the vision itself was Mason's complete calm in the face of this terrifying unconscious apocalypse.

Tired by his walk, Mason sat down on a low ornamental wall, screened from the surrounding houses by the rhododendron bushes. For a few minutes he played with the dust at his feet, stirring the white grains with a branch. Although formless and passive, the dust shared something of

the same evocative qualities of the fossil mollusc, radiating a curious compacted light.

In front of him, the road curved and dipped, the incline carrying it away on to the fields below. The chalk shoulder, covered by a mantle of green turf, rose into the clear sky. A metal shack had been erected on the slope, and a small group of figures moved about the entrance of a mine-shaft, adjusting a wooden hoist. Wishing that he had brought his wife's car, Mason watched the diminutive figures disappear one by one into the shaft.

The image of this elusive pantomime remained with him all day in the library, overlaying his memories of the dark waves rolling across the midnight streets. What sustained Mason was his conviction that others would soon also become aware of the sea.

When he went to bed that night he found Miriam sitting fully dressed in the armchair by the window, her face composed into an expression of calm determination.

'What are you doing?' he asked.

'Waiting.'

'For what?'

'The sea. Don't worry, simply ignore me and go to sleep. I don't mind sitting here with the light out.'

'Miriam . . .' Wearily, Mason took one of her slender hands and tried to draw her from the chair. 'Darling, what on earth will this achieve?'

'Isn't it obvious?'

Mason sat down on the foot of the bed. For some reason, not wholly concerned with the wish to protect her, he wanted to keep his wife from the sea. 'Miriam, don't you understand? I might not actually *see* it, in the literal sense. It might be . . .' he extemporized . . . 'an hallucination, or a dream.'

Miriam shook her head, hands clasped on the arms of the chair. 'I don't think it is. Anyway, I want to find out.'

Mason lay back on the bed. 'I wonder whether you're approaching this the right way –'

Miriam sat forward. 'Richard, you're taking it all so calmly; you accept this vision as if it were a strange headache. That's what frightens me. If you were really terrified by this sea I wouldn't worry, but . . .'

Half an hour later he fell asleep in the darkened room, Miriam's slim face watching him from the shadows.

Waves murmured, outside the windows the distant swish of racing foam drew him from sleep, the muffled thunder of rollers and the sounds of deep water drummed at his ears. Mason climbed out of bed, and dressed quickly as the hiss of receding water sounded up the street. In the corner, under the light reflected from the distant foam, Miriam lay asleep in the armchair, a bar of moonlight across her throat.

His bare feet soundless on the pavement, Mason ran towards the waves.

He stumbled across the glistening tideline as one of the breakers struck with a guttural roar. On his knees, Mason felt the cold brilliant water, seething with animalcula, spurt across his chest and shoulders, slacken and then withdraw, sucked like a gleaming floor into the mouth of the next breaker. His wet suit clinging to him like a drowned animal, Mason stared out across the sea. In the moonlight the white houses advanced into the water like the palazzos of a spectral Venice, mausoleums on the causeways of some island necropolis. Only the church spire was still visible. The water rode in to its high tide, a further twenty yards down the street, the spray carried almost to the Masons' house.

Mason waited for an interval between two waves and then waded through the shallows to the avenue which wound towards the distant headland. By now the water had crossed the roadway, swilling over the dark lawns and slapping at the doorsteps.

Half a mile from the headland he heard the great surge and sigh of the deeper water. Out of breath, he leaned against a fence as the cold foam cut across his legs, pulling him with its undertow. Illuminated by the racing clouds, he saw the pale figure of a woman standing above the sea on a stone parapet at the cliff's edge, her black robe lifting behind her in the wind, her long hair white in the moonlight. Far below her feet, the luminous waves leapt and vaulted like acrobats.

Mason ran along the pavement, losing sight of her as the road curved and the houses intervened. The water slackened and he caught a last glimpse of the woman's icy-white profile through the spray. Turning, the tide began to ebb and fade, and the sea shrank away between the houses, draining the night of its light and motion.

As the last bubbles dissolved on the damp pavement, Mason searched the headland, but the luminous figure had gone. His damp clothes dried themselves as he walked back through the empty streets. A last tang of brine was carried away off the hedges on the midnight air.

The next morning he told Miriam: 'It *was* a dream, after all. I think the sea has gone now. Anyway, I saw nothing last night.'

'Thank heavens, Richard. Are you sure?'

'I'm certain.' Mason smiled encouragingly. 'Thanks for keeping watch over me.'

'I'll sit up tonight as well.' She held up her hand. 'I insist. I feel all right after last night, and I want to drive this thing away, once and for all.' She frowned over the coffee cups. 'It's strange, but once or twice I think I heard the sea too. It sounded very old and blind, like something waking again after millions of years.'

On his way to the library, Mason made a detour towards the chalk outcropping, and parked the car where he had seen the moonlit figure of the white-haired woman watching the sea. The sunlight fell on the

pale turf, illuminating the mouth of the mine-shaft, around which the same desultory activity was taking place.

For the next fifteen minutes Mason drove in and out of the tree-lined avenues, peering over the hedges at the kitchen windows. Almost certainly she would live in one of the nearby houses, still wearing her black robe beneath a housecoat.

Later, at the library, he recognized a car he had seen on the headland. The driver, an elderly tweed-suited man, was examining the display cases of local geological finds.

'Who was that?' he asked Fellowes, the keeper of antiquities, as the car drove off. 'I've seen him on the cliffs.'

'Professor Goodhart, one of the party of paleontologists. Apparently they've uncovered an interesting bone-bed.' Fellowes gestured at the collection of femurs and jaw-bone fragments. 'With luck we may get a few pieces from them.'

Mason stared at the bones, aware of a sudden closing of the parallax within his mind.

Each night, as the sea emerged from the dark streets and the waves rolled farther towards the Masons' home, he would wake beside his sleeping wife and go out into the surging air, wading through the deep water towards the headland. There he would see the white-haired woman on the cliff's edge, her face raised above the roaring spray. Always he failed to reach her before the tide turned, and would kneel exhausted on the wet pavements as the drowned streets rose around him.

Once a police patrol car found him in its headlights, slumped against a gate-post in an open drive. On another night he forgot to close the front door when he returned. All through breakfast Miriam watched him with her old wariness, noticing the shadows which encircled his eyes like manacles.

'Richard, I think you should stop going to the library. You look worn out. It isn't that sea dream again?'

Mason shook his head, forcing a tired smile. 'No, that's finished with. Perhaps I've been over-working.'

Miriam held his hands. 'Did you fall over yesterday?' She examined Mason's palms. 'Darling, they're still *raw*! You must have grazed them only a few hours ago. Can't you remember?'

Abstracted, Mason invented some tale to satisfy her, then carried his coffee into the study and stared at the morning haze which lay across the rooftops, a soft lake of opacity that followed the same contours as the midnight sea. The mist dissolved in the sunlight, and for a moment the diminishing reality of the normal world reasserted itself, filling him with a poignant nostalgia.

Without thinking, he reached out to the fossil conch on the bookshelf, but involuntarily his hand withdrew before touching it.

Miriam stood beside him. 'Hateful thing,' she commented. 'Tell me, Richard, what do you think caused your dream?'

Mason shrugged. 'Perhaps it was a sort of memory . . .' He wondered whether to tell Miriam of the waves which he still heard in his sleep, and of the white-haired woman on the cliff's edge who seemed to beckon to him. But like all women Miriam believed that there was room for only one enigma in her husband's life. By an inversion of logic he felt that his dependence on his wife's private income, and the loss of self-respect, gave him the right to withhold something of himself from her.

'Richard, what's the matter?'

In his mind the spray opened like a diaphanous fan and the enchantress of the waves turned towards him.

Waist-high, the sea pounded across the lawn in a whirlpool. Mason pulled off his jacket and flung it into the water, and then waded out into the street. Higher than ever before, the waves had at last reached his house, breaking over the doorstep, but Mason had forgotten his wife. His attention was fixed upon the headland, which was lashed by a continuous storm of spray, almost obscuring the figure standing on its crest.

As Mason pressed on, sometimes sinking to his shoulders, shoals of luminous algae swarmed in the water around him. His eyes smarted in the saline air. He reached the lower slopes of the headland almost exhausted, and fell to his knees.

High above, he could hear the spray singing as it cut through the coigns of the cliff's edge, the deep base of the breakers overlaid by the treble of the keening air. Carried by the music, Mason climbed the flank of the headland, a thousand reflections of the moon in the breaking sea. As he reached the crest, the black robe hid the woman's face, but he could see her tall erect carriage and slender hips. Suddenly, without any apparent motion of her limbs, she moved away along the parapet.

'Wait!'

His shout was lost on the air. Mason ran forwards, and the figure turned and stared back at him. Her white hair swirled around her face like a spume of silver steam and then parted to reveal a face with empty eyes and notched mouth. A hand like a bundle of white sticks clawed towards him, and the figure rose through the whirling darkness like a gigantic bird.

Unaware whether the scream came from his own mouth or from this spectre, Mason stumbled back. Before he could catch himself he tripped over the wooden railing, and in a cackle of chains and pulleys fell backwards into the shaft, the sounds of the sea booming in its hurtling darkness.

After listening to the policeman's description, Professor Goodhart shook his head.

'I'm afraid not, sergeant. We've been working on the bed all week. No

one's fallen down the shaft.' One of the flimsy wooden rails was swinging loosely in the crisp air. 'But thank you for warning me. I suppose we must build a heavier railing, if this fellow is wandering around in his sleep.'

'I don't think he'll bother to come up here,' the sergeant said. 'It's quite a climb.' As an afterthought he added: 'Down at the library where he works they said you'd found a couple of skeletons in the shaft yesterday. I know it's only two days since he disappeared, but one of them couldn't possibly be his?' The sergeant shrugged. 'If there was some natural acid, say . . .'

Professor Goodhart drove his heel into the chalky turf. 'Pure calcium carbonate, about a mile thick, laid down during the Triassic Period 200 million years ago when there was a large inland sea here. The skeletons we found yesterday, a man's and a woman's, belong to two Cro-Magnon fisher people who lived on the shore just before it dried up. I wish I could oblige you – it's quite a problem to understand how these Cro-Magnon relics found their way into the bone-bed. This shaft wasn't sunk until about thirty years ago. Still, that's my problem, not yours.'

Returning to the police car, the sergeant shook his head. As they drove off he looked out at the endless stretch of placid suburban homes.

'Apparently there was an ancient sea here once. A million years ago.' He picked a crumpled flannel jacket off the back seat. 'That reminds me, I know what Mason's coat smells of – brine.'

1963

THE VENUS HUNTERS

When Dr Andrew Ward joined the Hubble Memorial Institute at Mount Vernon Observatory he never imagined that the closest of his new acquaintances would be an amateur star-gazer and spare-time prophet called Charles Kandinski, tolerantly regarded by the Observatory professionals as a madman. In fact, had either he or Professor Cameron, the Institute's Deputy Director, known just how far he was to be prepared to carry this friendship before his two-year tour at the Institute was over, Ward would certainly have left Mount Vernon the day he arrived and would never have become involved in the bizarre and curiously ironic tragedy which was to leave an ineradicable stigma upon his career.

Professor Cameron first introduced him to Kandinski. About a week after Ward came to the Hubble he and Cameron were lunching together in the Institute cafeteria.

'We'll go down to Vernon Gardens for coffee,' Cameron said when they finished dessert. 'I want to get a shampoo for Edna's roses and then we'll sit in the sun for an hour and watch the girls go by.' They strolled out through the terrace tables towards the parking lot. A mile away, beyond the conifers thinning out on the slopes above them, the three great Vernon domes gleamed like white marble against the sky. 'Incidentally, you can meet the opposition.'

'Is there another observatory at Vernon?' Ward asked as they set off along the drive in Cameron's Buick. 'What is it – an Air Force weather station?'

'Have you ever heard of Charles Kandinski?' Cameron said. 'He wrote a book called *The Landings from Outer Space*. It was published about three years ago.'

Ward shook his head doubtfully. They slowed down past the checkpoint at the gates and Cameron waved to the guard. 'Is that the man who claims to have seen extra-terrestrial beings? Martians or –'

'Venusians. That's Kandinski. Not only seen them,' Professor Cameron added. 'He's talked to them. Charles works at a café in Vernon Gardens. We know him fairly well.'

'He runs the other observatory?'

'Well, an old 4-inch MacDonald Refractor mounted in a bucket of cement. You probably wouldn't think much of it, but I wish we could see with our two-fifty just a tenth of what he sees.'

Ward nodded vaguely. The two observatories at which he had worked previously, Cape Town and the Milan Astrographie, had both attracted any number of cranks and charlatans eager to reveal their own final truths about the cosmos, and the prospect of meeting Kandinski interested him only slightly. 'What is he?' he asked. 'A practical joker, or just a lunatic?'

Professor Cameron propped his glasses on to his forehead and negotiated a tight hairpin. 'Neither,' he said.

Ward smiled at Cameron, idly studying his plump cherubic face with its puckish mouth and keen eyes. He knew that Cameron enjoyed a modest reputation as a wit. 'Has he ever claimed in front of you that he's seen a . . . Venusian?'

'Often,' Professor Cameron said. 'Charles lectures two or three times a week about the landings to the women's societies around here and put himself completely at our disposal. I'm afraid we had to tell him he was a little too advanced for us. But wait until you meet him.'

Ward shrugged and looked out at the long curving peach terraces lying below them, gold and heavy in the August heat. They dropped a thousand feet and the road widened and joined the highway which ran from the Vernon Gardens across the desert to Santa Vera and the coast.

Vernon Gardens was the nearest town to the Observatory and most of it had been built within the last few years, evidently with an eye on the tourist trade. They passed a string of blue and pink-washed houses, a school constructed of glass bricks and an abstract Baptist chapel. Along the main thoroughfare the shops and stores were painted in bright jazzy colours, the vivid awnings and neon signs like street scenery in an experimental musical.

Professor Cameron turned off into a wide tree-lined square and parked by a cluster of fountains in the centre. He and Ward walked towards the cafés – Al's Fresco Diner, Ylla's, the Dome – which stretched down to the sidewalk. Around the square were a dozen gift-shops filled with cheap souvenirs: silverplate telescopes and models of the great Vernon dome masquerading as ink-stands and cigar-boxes, plus a juvenile omnium gatherum of miniature planetaria, space helmets and plastic 3-D star atlases.

The café to which they went was decorated in the same futuristic motifs. The chairs and tables were painted a drab aluminium grey, their limbs and panels cut in random geometric shapes. A silver rocket ship, ten feet long, its paint peeling off in rusty strips, reared up from a pedestal among the tables. Across it was painted the café's name.

'The Site Tycho.'

A large mobile had been planted in the ground by the sidewalk and dangled down over them, its vanes and struts flashing in the sun. Gingerly Professor Cameron pushed it away. 'I'll swear that damn thing is growing,'

he confided to Ward. 'I must tell Charles to prune it.' He lowered himself into a chair by one of the open-air tables, put on a fresh pair of sunglasses and focused them at the long brown legs of a girl sauntering past.

Left alone for the moment, Ward looked around him and picked at a cellophane transfer of a ringed planet glued to the table-top. The Site Tycho was also used as a small science fiction exchange library. A couple of metal bookstands stood outside the café door, where a soberly dressed middle-aged man, obviously hiding behind his upturned collar, worked his way quickly through the rows of paperbacks. At another table a young man with an intent, serious face was reading a magazine. His high cerebrotonic forehead was marked across the temple by a ridge of pink tissue, which Ward wryly decided was a lobotomy scar.

'Perhaps we ought to show our landing permits,' he said to Cameron when after three or four minutes no one had appeared to serve them. 'Or at least get our pH's checked.'

Professor Cameron grinned. 'Don't worry, no customs, no surgery.' He took his eyes off the sidewalk for a moment. 'This looks like him now.'

A tall, bearded man in a short-sleeved tartan shirt and pale green slacks came out of the café towards them with two cups of coffee on a tray.

'Hello, Charles,' Cameron greeted him. 'There you are. We were beginning to think we'd lost ourselves in a time-trap.'

The tall man grunted something and put the cups down. Ward guessed that he was about 55 years old. He was well over six feet tall, with a massive sunburnt head and lean but powerfully muscled arms.

'Andrew, this is Charles Kandinski.' Cameron introduced the two men. 'Andrew's come to work for me, Charles. He photographed all those Cepheids for the Milan Conference last year.'

Kandinski nodded. His eyes examined Ward critically but showed no signs of interest.

'I've been telling him all about you, Charles,' Cameron went on, 'and how we all follow your work. No further news yet, I trust?'

Kandinski's lips parted in a slight smile. He listened politely to Cameron's banter and looked out over the square, his great seamed head raised to the sky.

'Andrew's read your book, Charles,' Cameron was saying. 'Very interested. He'd like to see the originals of those photographs. Wouldn't you, Andrew?'

'Yes, I certainly would,' Ward said.

Kandinski gazed down at him again. His expression was not so much penetrating as detached and impersonal, as if he were assessing Ward with an utter lack of bias, so complete, in fact, that it left no room for even the smallest illusion. Previously Ward had only seen this expression in the eyes of the very old. 'Good,' Kandinski said. 'At present they are in a safe deposit box at my bank, but if you are serious I will get them out.'

Just then two young women wearing wide-brimmed Rapallo hats made their way through the tables. They sat down and smiled at Kandinski. He nodded to Ward and Cameron and went over to the young women, who began to chatter to him animatedly.

'Well, he seems popular with them,' Ward commented. 'He's certainly not what I anticipated. I hope I didn't offend him over the plates. He was taking you seriously.'

'He's a little sensitive about them,' Cameron explained. 'The famous dustbin-lid flying saucers. You mustn't think I bait him, though. To tell the truth I hold Charles in great respect. When all's said and done, we're in the same racket.'

'Are we?' Ward said doubtfully. 'I haven't read his book. Does he say in so many words that he saw and spoke to a visitor from Venus?'

'Precisely. Don't you believe him?'

Ward laughed and looked through the coins in his pocket, leaving one on the table. 'I haven't tried to yet. You say the whole thing isn't a hoax?'

'Of course not.'

'How do you explain it then? Compensation-fantasy or –'

Professor Cameron smiled. 'Wait until you know Charles a little better.'

'I already know the man's messianic,' Ward said dryly. 'Let me guess the rest. He lives on yoghurt, weaves his own clothes, and stands on his head all night, reciting the Bhagavadgita backwards.'

'He doesn't,' Cameron said, still smiling at Ward. 'He happens to be a big man who suffers from barber's rash. I thought he'd have you puzzled.'

Ward pulled the transfer off the table. Some science fantast had skilfully pencilled in an imaginary topography on the planet's surface. There were canals, craters and lake systems named Verne, Wells and Bradbury. 'Where did he see this Venusian?' Ward asked, trying to keep the curiosity out of his voice.

'About twenty miles from here, out in the desert off the Santa Vera highway. He was picnicking with some friends, went off for a stroll in the sandhills and ran straight into the space-ship. His friends swear he was perfectly normal both immediately before and after the landing, and all of them saw the inscribed metallic tablet which the Venusian pilot left behind. Some sort of ultimatum, if I remember, warning mankind to abandon all its space programmes. Apparently someone up there does not like us.'

'Has he still got the tablet?' Ward asked.

'No. Unluckily it combusted spontaneously in the heat. But Charles managed to take a photograph of it.'

Ward laughed. 'I bet he did. It sounds like a beautifully organized hoax. I suppose he made a fortune out of his book?'

'About 150 dollars. He had to pay for the printing himself. Why do you think he works here? The reviews were too unfavourable. People who read science fiction apparently dislike flying saucers, and everyone else dismissed him as a lunatic.' He stood up. 'We might as well get back.'

As they left the café Cameron waved to Kandinski, who was still talking to the young women. They were leaning forward and listening with rapt attention to whatever he was saying.

'What do the people in Vernon Gardens think of him?' Ward asked as they moved away under the trees.

'Well, it's a curious thing, almost without exception those who actually know Kandinski are convinced he's sincere and that he saw an alien space craft, while at the same time realizing the absolute impossibility of the whole story.'

'"I know God exists, but I cannot *believe* in him"?'

'Exactly. Naturally, most people in Vernon think he's crazy. About three months after he met the Venusian, Charles saw another UFO chasing its tail over the town. He got the Fire Police out, alerted the Radar Command chain and even had the National Guard driving around town ringing a bell. Sure enough, there were two white blobs diving about in the clouds. Unfortunately for Charles, they were caused by the headlights of one of the asparagus farmers in the valley doing some night spraying. Charles was the first to admit it, but at 3 o'clock in the morning no one was very pleased.'

'Who is Kandinski, anyway?' Ward asked. 'Where does he come from?'

'He doesn't make a profession of seeing Venusians, if that's what you mean. He was born in Alaska, for some years taught psychology at Mexico City University. He's been just about everywhere, had a thousand different jobs. A veteran of the private evacuations. Get his book.'

Ward murmured non-committally. They entered a small arcade and stood for a moment by the first shop, an aquarium called 'The Nouvelle Vague', watching the Angel fish and Royal Brahmins swim dreamily up and down their tanks.

'It's worth reading,' Professor Cameron went on. 'Without exaggerating, it's really one of the most interesting documents I've ever come across.'

'I'm afraid I have a closed mind when it comes to interplanetary bogey-men,' Ward said.

'A pity,' Cameron rejoined. 'I find them fascinating. Straight out of the unconscious. The fish too,' he added, pointing at the tanks. He grinned whimsically at Ward and ducked away into a horticulture store halfway down the arcade.

While Professor Cameron was looking through the sprays on the hormone counter, Ward went over to a news-stand and glanced at the magazines. The proximity of the observatory had prompted a large selection of popular astronomical guides and digests, most of them with illustrations of the Mount Vernon domes on their wrappers. Among

them Ward noticed a dusty, dog-eared paperback, *The Landings from Outer Space* by Charles Kandinski. On the front cover a gigantic space vehicle, at least the size of New York, tens of thousands of portholes ablaze with light, was soaring majestically across a brilliant backdrop of stars and spiral nebulae.

Ward picked up the book and turned to the end cover. Here there was a photograph of Kandinski, dressed in a dark lounge suit several sizes too small, peering stiffly into the eye-piece of his MacDonald.

Ward hesitated before finally taking out his wallet. He bought the book and slipped it into his pocket as Professor Cameron emerged from the horticulture store.

'Get your shampoo?' Ward asked.

Cameron brandished a brass insecticide gun, then slung it, buccaneer-like, under his belt. 'My disintegrator,' he said, patting the butt of the gun. 'There's a positive plague of white ants in the garden, like something out of a science fiction nightmare. I've tried to convince Edna that their real source is psychological. Remember the story "Leiningen vs the Ants"? A classic example of the forces of the Id rebelling against the Super-Ego.' He watched a girl in a black bikini and lemon-coloured sunglasses move gracefully through the arcade and added meditatively: 'You know, Andrew, like everyone else my real vocation was to be a psychiatrist. I spend so long analysing my motives I've no time left to act.'

'Kandinski's Super-Ego must be in difficulties,' Ward remarked. 'You haven't told me your explanation yet.'

'What explanation?'

'Well, what's really at the bottom of this Venusian he claims to have seen?'

'Nothing is at the bottom of it. Why?'

Ward smiled helplessly. 'You will tell me next that you really believe him.'

Professor Cameron chuckled. They reached his car and climbed in. 'Of course I do,' he said.

When, three days later, Ward borrowed Professor Cameron's car and drove down to the rail depot in Vernon Gardens to collect a case of slides which had followed him across the Atlantic, he had no intention of seeing Charles Kandinski again. He had read one or two chapters of Kandinski's book before going to sleep the previous night and dropped it in boredom. Kandinski's description of his encounter with the Venusian was not only puerile and crudely written but, most disappointing of all, completely devoid of imagination. Ward's work at the Institute was now taking up most of his time. The Annual Congress of the International Geophysical Association was being held at Mount Vernon in little under a month, and most of the burden for organizing the three-week programme of lectures, semesters and dinners had fallen on Professor Cameron and himself.

But as he drove away from the depot past the cafés in the square

he caught sight of Kandinski on the terrace of the Site Tycho. It was 3 o'clock, a time when most people in Vernon Gardens were lying asleep indoors, and Kandinski seemed to be the only person out in the sun. He was scrubbing away energetically at the abstract tables with his long hairy arms, head down so that his beard was almost touching the metal tops, like an aboriginal halfman prowling in dim bewilderment over the ruins of a futuristic city lost in an inversion of time.

On an impulse, Ward parked the car in the square and walked across to the Site Tycho, but as soon as Kandinski came over to his table he wished he had gone to another of the cafés. Kandinski had been reticent enough the previous day, but now that Cameron was absent he might well turn out to be a garrulous bore.

After serving him, Kandinski sat down on a bench by the bookshelves and stared moodily at his feet. Ward watched him quietly for five minutes, as the mobiles revolved delicately in the warm air, deciding whether to approach Kandinski. Then he stood up and went over to the rows of magazines. He picked in a desultory way through half a dozen and turned to Kandinski. 'Can you recommend any of these?'

Kandinski looked up. 'Do you read science fiction?' he asked matter-of-factly.

'Not as a rule,' Ward admitted. When Kandinski said nothing he went on: 'Perhaps I'm too sceptical, but I can't take it seriously.'

Kandinski pulled a blister on his palm. 'No one suggests you should. What you mean is that you take it too seriously.'

Accepting the rebuke with a smile at himself, Ward pulled out one of the magazines and sat down at a table next to Kandinski. On the cover was a placid suburban setting of snugly eaved houses, yew trees and children's bicycles. Spreading slowly across the roof-tops was an enormous pulpy nightmare, blocking out the sun behind it and throwing a weird phosphorescent glow over the roofs and lawns. 'You're probably right,' Ward said, showing the cover to Kandinski. 'I'd hate to want to take that seriously.'

Kandinski waved it aside. 'I have seen 11th-century illuminations of the pentateuch more sensational than any of these covers.' He pointed to the cinema theatre on the far side of the square, where the four-hour Biblical epic *Cain and Abel* was showing. Above the trees an elaborate technicolored hoarding showed Cain, wearing what appeared to be a suit of Roman armour, wrestling with an immense hydraheaded boa constrictor.

Kandinski shrugged tolerantly. 'If Michelangelo were working for MGM today would he produce anything better?'

Ward laughed. 'You may well be right. Perhaps the House of the Medicis should be re-christened "16th Century-Fox".'

Kandinski stood up and straightened the shelves. 'I saw you here with Godfrey Cameron,' he said over his shoulder. 'You're working at the Observatory?'

'At the Hubble.'

Kandinski came and sat down beside Ward. 'Cameron is a good man. A very pleasant fellow.'

'He thinks a great deal of you,' Ward volunteered, realizing that Kandinski was probably short of friends.

'You mustn't believe everything that Cameron says about me,' Kandinski said suddenly. He hesitated, apparently uncertain whether to confide further in Ward, and then took the magazine from him. 'There are better ones here. You have to exercise some discrimination.'

'It's not so much the sensationalism that puts me off,' Ward explained, 'as the psychological implications. Most of the themes in these stories come straight out of the more unpleasant reaches of the unconscious.'

Kandinski glanced sharply at Ward, a trace of amusement in his eyes. 'That sounds rather dubious and, if I may say so, second-hand. Take the best of these stories for what they are: imaginative exercises on the theme of tomorrow.'

'You read a good deal of science fiction?' Ward asked.

Kandinski shook his head. 'Never. Not since I was a child.'

'I'm surprised,' Ward said. 'Professor Cameron told me you had written a science fiction novel.'

'Not a novel,' Kandinski corrected.

'I'd like to read it,' Ward went on. 'From what Cameron said it sounded fascinating, almost Swiftian in concept. This space-craft which arrives from Venus and the strange conversations the pilot holds with a philosopher he meets. A modern morality. Is that the subject?'

Kandinski watched Ward thoughtfully before replying. 'Loosely, yes. But, as I said, the book is not a novel. It is a factual and literal report of a Venus landing which actually took place, a diary of the most significant encounter in history since Paul saw his vision of Christ on the road to Damascus.' He lifted his huge bearded head and gazed at Ward without embarrassment. 'As a matter of interest, as Professor Cameron probably explained to you, I was the man who witnessed the landing.'

Still maintaining his pose, Ward frowned intently. 'Well, in fact Cameron did say something of the sort, but I . . .'

'But you found it difficult to believe?' Kandinski suggested ironically.

'Just a little,' Ward admitted. 'Are you seriously claiming that you did see a Venusian space-craft?'

Kandinski nodded. 'Exactly.' Then, as if aware that their conversation had reached a familiar turning he suddenly seemed to lose interest in Ward. 'Excuse me.' He nodded politely to Ward, picked up a length of hose-pipe connected to a faucet and began to spray one of the big mobiles.

Puzzled but still sceptical, Ward sat back and watched him critically, then fished in his pockets for some change. 'I must say I admire you for taking it all so calmly,' he told Kandinski as he paid him.

'What makes you think I do?'

'Well, if I'd seen, let alone spoken to a visitor from Venus I think I'd be running around in a flat spin, notifying every government and observatory in the world.'

'I did,' Kandinski said. 'As far as I could. No one was very interested.'

Ward shook his head and laughed. 'It is incredible, to put it mildly.'

'I agree with you.'

'What I mean,' Ward said, 'is that it's straight out of one of these science fiction stories of yours.'

Kandinski rubbed his lips with a scarred knuckle, obviously searching for some means of ending the conversation. 'The resemblance is misleading. They are not my stories,' he added parenthetically. 'This café is the only one which would give me work, for a perhaps obvious reason. As for the incredibility, let me say that I was and still am completely amazed. You may think I take it all calmly, but ever since the landing I have lived in a state of acute anxiety and foreboding. But short of committing some spectacular crime to draw attention to myself I don't see now how I can convince anyone.'

Ward gestured with his glasses. 'Perhaps. But I'm surprised you don't realize the very simple reasons why people refuse to take you seriously. For example, why should you be the only person to witness an event of such staggering implications? Why have *you* alone seen a Venusian?'

'A sheer accident.'

'But why should a space-craft from Venus land here?'

'What better place than near Mount Vernon Observatory?'

'I can think of any number. The UN Assembly, for one.'

Kandinski smiled lightly. 'Columbus didn't make his first contacts with the North-American Indians at the Iroquois-Sioux Tribal Conference.'

'That may be,' Ward admitted, beginning to feel impatient. 'What did this Venusian look like?'

Kandinski smiled wearily at the empty tables and picked up his hose again. 'I don't know whether you've read my book,' he said, 'but if you haven't you'll find it all there.'

'Professor Cameron mentioned that you took some photographs of the Venusian space-craft. Could I examine them?'

'Certainly,' Kandinski replied promptly. 'I'll bring them here tomorrow. You're welcome to test them in any way you wish.'

That evening Ward had dinner with the Camerons. Professor Renthall, Director of the Hubble, and his wife completed the party. The table-talk consisted almost entirely of good-humoured gossip about their colleagues retailed by Cameron and Renthall, and Ward was able to mention his conversation with Kandinski.

'At first I thought he was mad, but now I'm not so certain. There's something rather too subtle about him. The way he creates an impression of absolute integrity, but at the same time never gives you a chance to tackle him directly on any point of detail. And when you do manage to

ask him outright about this Venusian his answers are far too pat. I'm convinced the whole thing is an elaborate hoax.'

Professor Renthall shook his head. 'No, it's no hoax. Don't you agree, Godfrey?'

Cameron nodded. 'Not in Andrew's sense, anyway.'

'But what other explanation is there?' Ward asked. 'We know he hasn't seen a Venusian, so he must be a fraud. Unless you think he's a lunatic. And he certainly doesn't behave like one.'

'What is a lunatic?' Professor Renthall asked rhetorically, peering into the faceted stem of his raised hock glass. 'Merely a man with more understanding than he can contain. I think Charles belongs in that category.'

'The definition doesn't explain him, sir,' Ward insisted. 'He's going to lend me his photographs and when I prove those are fakes I think I'll be able to get under his guard.'

'Poor Charles,' Edna Cameron said. 'Why shouldn't he have seen a space-ship? I think I see them every day.'

'That's just what I feel, dear,' Cameron said, patting his wife's matronly, brocaded shoulder. 'Let Charles have his Venusian if he wants to. Damn it, all it's trying to do is ban Project Apollo. An excellent idea, I have always maintained; only the professional astronomer has any business in space. After the Rainbow tests there isn't an astronomer anywhere in the world who wouldn't follow Charles Kandinski to the stake.' He turned to Renthall. 'By the way, I wonder what Charles is planning for the Congress? A Neptunian? Or perhaps a whole delegation from Proxima Centauri. We ought to fit him out with a space-suit and a pavilion – "Charles Kandinski – New Worlds for Old".'

'Santa Claus in a space-suit,' Professor Renthall mused. 'That's a new one. Send him a ticket.'

The next weekend Ward returned the twelve plates to the Site Tycho.

'Well?' Kandinski asked.

'It's difficult to say,' Ward answered. 'They're all too heavily absorbed. They could be clever montages of light brackets and turbine blades. One of them looks like a close-up of a clutch plate. There's a significant lack of any real corroborative details which you'd expect somewhere in so wide a selection.' He paused. 'On the other hand, they could be genuine.'

Kandinski said nothing, took the paper package, and went off into the café.

The interior of the Site Tycho had been designed to represent the control room of a space-ship on the surface of the Moon. Hidden fluorescent lighting glimmered through plastic wall fascia and filled the room with an eerie blue glow. Behind the bar a large mural threw the curving outline of the Moon on to an illuminated star-scape. The doors leading to the rest-rooms were circular and bulged outwards like air-locks, distinguished from each other by the symbols ♂ and ♀.

The total effect was ingenious but somehow reminiscent to Ward of a twenty-fifth-century cave.

He sat down at the bar and waited while Kandinski packed the plates away carefully in an old leather briefcase.

'I've read your book,' Ward said. 'I had looked at it the last time I saw you, but I read it again thoroughly.' He waited for some comment upon this admission, but Kandinski went over to an old portable typewriter standing at the far end of the bar and began to type laboriously with one finger. 'Have you seen any more Venusians since the book was published?' Ward asked.

'None,' Kandinski said.

'Do you think you will?'

'Perhaps.' Kandinski shrugged and went on with his typing.

'What are you working on now?' Ward asked.

'A lecture I am giving on Friday evening,' Kandinski said. Two keys locked together and he flicked them back. 'Would you care to come? Eight-thirty, at the high school near the Baptist chapel.'

'If I can,' Ward said. He saw that Kandinski wanted to get rid of him. 'Thanks for letting me see the plates.' He made his way out into the sun. People were walking about through the fresh morning air, and he caught the clean scent of peach blossom carried down the slopes into the town.

Suddenly Ward felt how enclosed and insane it had been inside the Tycho, and how apposite had been his description of it as a cave, with its residential magician incanting over his photographs like a down-at-heel Merlin manipulating his set of runes. He felt annoyed with himself for becoming involved with Kandinski and allowing the potent charisma of his personality to confuse him. Obviously Kandinski played upon the instinctive sympathy for the outcast, his whole pose of integrity and conviction a device for drawing the gullible towards him.

Letting the light spray from the fountains fall across his face, Ward crossed the square towards his car.

Away in the distance 2,000 feet above, rising beyond a screen of fir trees, the three Mount Vernon domes shone together in the sun like a futuristic Taj Mahal.

Fifteen miles from Vernon Gardens the Santa Vera highway circled down from the foot of Mount Vernon into the first low scrub-covered hills which marked the southern edge of the desert. Ward looked out at the long banks of coarse sand stretching away through the haze, their outlines blurring in the afternoon heat. He glanced at the book lying on the seat beside him, open at the map printed between its end covers, and carefully checked his position, involuntarily slowing the speed of the Chevrolet as he moved nearer to the site of the Venus landings.

In the fortnight since he had returned the photographs to the Site Tycho, he had seen Kandinski only once, at the lecture delivered the previous night. Ward had deliberately stayed away from the Site Tycho,

but he had seen a poster advertising the lecture and driven down to the school despite himself.

The lecture was delivered in the gymnasium before an audience of forty or fifty people, most of them women, who formed one of the innumerable local astronomical societies. Listening to the talk round him, Ward gathered that their activities principally consisted of trying to identify more than half a dozen of the constellations. Kandinski had lectured to them on several occasions and the subject of this latest instalment was his researches into the significance of the Venusian tablet he had been analysing for the last three years.

When Kandinski stepped onto the dais there was a brief round of applause. He was wearing a lounge suit of a curiously archaic cut and had washed his beard, which bushed out above his string tie so that he resembled a Mormon patriarch or the homespun saint of some fervent evangelical community.

For the benefit of any new members, he prefaced his lecture with a brief account of his meeting with the Venusian, and then turned to his analysis of the tablet. This was the familiar ultimatum warning mankind to abandon its preparations for the exploration of space, for the ostensible reason that, just as the sea was a universal image of the unconscious, so space was nothing less than an image of psychosis and death, and that if he tried to penetrate the interplanetary voids man would only plunge to earth like a demented Icarus, unable to scale the vastness of the cosmic zero. Kandinski's real motives for introducing this were all too apparent – the expected success of Project Apollo and subsequent landings on Mars and Venus would, if nothing else, conclusively expose his fantasies.

However, by the end of the lecture Ward found that his opinion of Kandinski had experienced a complete about-face.

As a lecturer Kandinski was poor, losing words, speaking in a slow ponderous style and trapping himself in long subordinate clauses, but his quiet, matter-of-fact tone and absolute conviction in the importance of what he was saying, coupled with the nature of his material, held the talk together. His analysis of the Venusian cryptograms, a succession of intricate philological theorems, was well above the heads of his audience, but what began to impress Ward, as much as the painstaking preparation which must have preceded the lecture, was Kandinski's acute nervousness in delivering it. Ward noticed that he suffered from an irritating speech impediment that made it difficult for him to pronounce 'Venusian', and he saw that Kandinski, far from basking in the limelight, was delivering the lecture only out of a deep sense of obligation to his audience and was greatly relieved when the ordeal was over.

At the end Kandinski had invited questions. These, with the exception of the chairman's, all concerned the landing of the alien space vehicle and ignored the real subject of the lecture. Kandinski answered them all carefully, taking in good part the inevitable facetious questions. Ward

noted with interest the audience's curious ambivalence, simultaneously fascinated by and resentful of Kandinski's exposure of their own private fantasies, an expression of the same ambivalence which had propelled so many of the mana-personalities of history towards their inevitable Calvarys.

Just as the chairman was about to close the meeting, Ward stood up.

'Mr Kandinski. You say that this Venusian indicated that there was also life on one of the moons of Uranus. Can you tell us how he did this if there was no verbal communication between you?'

Kandinski showed no surprise at seeing Ward. 'Certainly; as I told you, he drew eight concentric circles in the sand, one for each of the planets. Around Uranus he drew five lesser orbits and marked one of these. Then he pointed to himself and to me and to a patch of lichen. From this I deduced, reasonably I maintain, that –'

'Excuse me, Mr Kandinski,' Ward interrupted. 'You say he drew five orbits around Uranus? One for each of the moons?'

Kandinski nodded. 'Yes. Five.'

'That was in 1960,' Ward went on. 'Three weeks ago Professor Pineau at Brussels discovered a sixth moon of Uranus.'

The audience looked around at Ward and began to murmur.

'Why should this Venusian have omitted one of the moons?' Ward asked, his voice ringing across the gymnasium.

Kandinski frowned and peered at Ward suspiciously. 'I didn't know there was a sixth moon . . .' he began.

'Exactly!' someone called out. The audience began to titter.

'I can understand the Venusian not wishing to introduce any difficulties,' Ward said, 'but this seems a curious way of doing it.'

Kandinski appeared at a loss. Then he introduced Ward to the audience. 'Dr Ward is a professional while I am only an amateur,' he admitted. 'I am afraid I cannot explain the anomaly. Perhaps my memory is at fault. But I am sure the Venusian drew only five orbits.' He stepped down from the dais and strode out hurriedly, scowling into his beard, pursued by a few derisory hoots from the audience.

It took Ward fifteen minutes to free himself from the knot of admiring white-gloved spinsters who cornered him between two vaulting horses. When he broke away he ran out to his car and drove into Vernon Gardens, hoping to see Kandinski and apologize to him.

Five miles into the desert Ward approached a nexus of rock-cuttings and causeways which were part of an abandoned irrigation scheme. The colours of the hills were more vivid now, bright siliconic reds and yellows, crossed with sharp stabs of light from the exposed quartz veins. Following the map on the seat, he turned off the highway onto a rough track which ran along the bank of a dried-up canal. He passed a few rusting sections of picket fencing, a derelict grader half-submerged under the sand, and a collection of dilapidated metal shacks. The car bumped over the potholes

at little more than ten miles an hour, throwing up clouds of hot ashy dust that swirled high into the air behind him.

Two miles along the canal the track came to an end. Ward stopped the car and waited for the dust to subside. Carrying Kandinski's book in front of him like a divining instrument, he set off on foot across the remaining three hundred yards. The contours around him were marked on the map, but the hills had shifted several hundred yards westwards since the book's publication and he found himself wandering about from one crest to another, peering into shallow depressions only as old as the last sand-storm. The entire landscape seemed haunted by strange currents and moods; the sand swirls surging down the aisles of dunes and the proximity of the horizon enclosed the whole place of stones with invisible walls.

Finally he found the ring of hills indicated and climbed a narrow saddle leading to its centre. When he scaled the thirty-foot slope he stopped abruptly.

Down on his knees in the middle of the basin with his back to Ward, the studs of his boots flashing in the sunlight, was Kandinski. There was a clutter of tiny objects on the sand around him, and at first Ward thought he was at prayer, making his oblations to the tutelary deities of Venus. Then he saw that Kandinski was slowly scraping the surface of the ground with a small trowel. A circle about 20 yards in diameter had been marked off with pegs and string into a series of wedge-shaped allotments. Every few seconds Kandinski carefully decanted a small heap of grit into one of the test-tubes mounted in a wooden rack in front of him.

Ward put away the book and walked down the slope. Kandinski looked around and then climbed to his feet. The coating of red ash on his beard gave him a fiery, prophetic look. He recognized Ward and raised the trowel in greeting.

Ward stopped at the edge of the string perimeter. 'What on earth are you doing?'

'I am collecting soil specimens.' Kandinski bent down and corked one of the tubes. He looked tired but worked away steadily.

Ward watched him finish a row. 'It's going to take you a long time to cover the whole area. I thought there weren't any gaps left in the Periodic Table.'

'The space-craft rotated at speed before it rose into the air. This surface is abrasive enough to have scratched off a few minute filings. With luck I may find one of them.' Kandinski smiled thinly. '262. Venusium, I hope.'

Ward started to say: 'But the transuranic elements decay spontaneously . . .' and then walked over to the centre of the circle, where there was a round indentation, three feet deep and five across. The inner surface was glazed and smooth. It was shaped like an inverted cone and looked as if it had been caused by the boss of an enormous spinning top. 'This is where the space-craft landed?'

Kandinski nodded. He filled the last tube and then stowed the rack away in a canvas satchel. He came over to Ward and stared down at the hole. 'What does it look like to you? A meteor impact? Or an oil drill, perhaps?' A smile showed behind his dusty beard. 'The F-109s at the Air Force Weapons School begin their target runs across here. It might have been caused by a rogue cannon shell.'

Ward stooped down and felt the surface of the pit, running his fingers thoughtfully over the warm fused silica. 'More like a 500-pound bomb. But the cone is geometrically perfect. It's certainly unusual.'

'Unusual?' Kandinski chuckled to himself and picked up the satchel.

'Has anyone else been out here?' Ward asked as they trudged up the slope.

'Two so-called experts.' Kandinski slapped the sand off his knees. 'A geologist from Gulf-Vacuum and an Air Force ballistics officer. You'll be glad to hear that they both thought I had dug the pit myself and then fused the surface with an acetylene torch.' He peered critically at Ward. 'Why did you come out here today?'

'Idle curiosity,' Ward said. 'I had an afternoon off and I felt like a drive.'

They reached the crest of the hill and he stopped and looked down into the basin. The lines of string split the circle into a strange horological device, a huge zodiacal mandala, the dark patches in the arcs Kandinski had been working telling its stations.

'You were going to tell me why you came out here,' Kandinski said as they walked back to the car.

Ward shrugged. 'I suppose I wanted to prove something to myself. There's a problem of reconciliation.' He hesitated, and then began: 'You see, there are some things which are self-evidently false. The laws of common sense and everyday experience refute them. I know a lot of the evidence for many things we believe in is pretty thin, but I don't have to embark on a theory of knowledge to decide that the Moon isn't made of green cheese.'

'Well?' Kandinski shifted the satchel to his other shoulder.

'This Venusian you've seen,' Ward said. 'The landing, the runic tablet. I can't believe them. Every piece of evidence I've seen, all the circumstantial details, the facts given in this book . . . they're all patently false.' He turned to one of the middle chapters. 'Take this at random – "A phosphorescent green fluid pulsed through the dorsal lung-chamber of the Prime's helmet, inflating two opaque fan-like gills . . ."' Ward closed the book and shrugged helplessly. Kandinski stood a few feet away from him, the sunlight breaking across the deep lines of his face.

'Now I know what you say to my objections,' Ward went on. 'If you told a 19th century chemist that lead could be transmuted into gold he would have dismissed you as a mediaevalist. But the point is that he'd have been right to do so –'

'I understand,' Kandinski interrupted. 'But you still haven't explained why you came out here today.'

Ward stared out over the desert. High above, a stratojet was doing cuban eights into the sun, the spiral vapour trails drifting across the sky like gigantic fragments of an apocalyptic message. Looking around, he realized that Kandinski must have walked from the bus-stop on the highway. 'I'll give you a lift back,' he said.

As they drove along the canal he turned to Kandinski. 'I enjoyed your lecture last night. I apologize for trying to make you look a fool.'

Kandinski was loosening his boot-straps. He laughed unreproachfully. 'You put me in an awkward position. I could hardly have challenged you. I can't afford to subscribe to every astronomical journal. Though a sixth moon would have been big news.' As they neared Vernon Gardens he asked: 'Would you like to come in and look at the tablet analysis?'

Ward made no reply to the invitation. He drove around the square and parked under the trees, then looked up at the fountains, tapping his fingers on the windshield. Kandinski sat beside him, cogitating into his beard.

Ward watched him carefully. 'Do you think this Venusian will return?'

Kandinski nodded. 'Yes. I am sure he will.'

Later they sat together at a broad roll-top desk in the room above the Tycho. Around the wall hung white cardboard screens packed with lines of cuneiform glyphics and Kandinski's progressive breakdown of their meaning.

Ward held an enlargement of the original photograph of the Venusian tablet and listened to Kandinski's explanation.

'As you see from this,' Kandinski explained, 'in all probability there are not millions of Venusians, as every one would expect, but only three or four of them altogether. Two are circling Venus, a third Uranus and possibly a fourth is in orbit around Neptune. This solves the difficulty that puzzled you and antagonizes everyone else. Why should the Prime have approached only one person out of several hundred million and selected him on a completely random basis? Now obviously he had seen the Russian and American satellite capsules and assumed that our race, like his now, numbered no more than three or four, then concluded from the atmospheric H-bomb tests that we were in conflict and would soon destroy ourselves. This is one of the reasons why I think he will return shortly and why it is important to organize a world-wide reception for him on a governmental level.'

'Wait a minute,' Ward said. 'He must have known that the population of this planet numbered more than three or four. Even the weakest telescope would demonstrate that.'

'Of course, but he would naturally assume that the millions of inhabitants

of the Earth belonged to an aboriginal sub-species, perhaps employed as work animals. After all, if he observed that despite this planet's immense resources the bulk of its population lived like animals, an alien visitor could only decide that they were considered as such.'

'But space vehicles are supposed to have been observing us since the Babylonian era, long before the development of satellite rockets. There have been thousands of recorded sightings.'

Kandinski shook his head. 'None of them has been authenticated.'

'What about the other landings that have been reported recently?' Ward asked. 'Any number of people have seen Venusians and Martians.'

'Have they?' Kandinski asked sceptically. 'I wish I could believe that. Some of the encounters reveal marvellous powers of invention, but no one can accept them as anything but fantasy.'

'The same criticism has been levelled at your space-craft,' Ward reminded him.

Kandinski seemed to lose patience. 'I *saw* it,' he explained, impotently tossing his notebook on to the desk. 'I *spoke* to the Prime!'

Ward nodded non-committally and picked up the photograph again. Kandinski stepped over to him and took it out of his hands. 'Ward,' he said carefully. 'Believe me. You must. You know I am too big a man to waste myself on a senseless charade.' His massive hands squeezed Ward's shoulders, and almost lifted him off the seat. '*Believe* me. Together we can be ready for the next landings and alert the world. I am only Charles Kandinski, a waiter at a third-rate café, but you are Dr Andrew Ward of Mount Vernon Observatory. They will listen to you. Try to realize what this may mean for mankind.'

Ward pulled himself away from Kandinski and rubbed his shoulders.

'Ward, do you believe me? Ask yourself.'

Ward looked up pensively at Kandinski towering over him, his red beard like the burning, unconsumed bush.

'I think so,' he said quietly. 'Yes, I do.'

A week later the 23rd Congress of the International Geophysical Association opened at Mount Vernon Observatory. At 3.30 P.M., in the Hoyle Library amphitheatre, Professor Renthall was to deliver the inaugural address welcoming the 92 delegates and 25 newspaper and agency reporters to the fortnight's programme of lectures and discussions.

Shortly after 11 o'clock that morning Ward and Professor Cameron completed their final arrangements and escaped down to Vernon Gardens for an hour's relaxation.

'Well,' Cameron said as they walked over to the Site Tycho, 'I've got a pretty good idea of what it must be like to run the Waldorf-Astoria.' They picked one of the sidewalk tables and sat down. 'I haven't been here for weeks,' Cameron said. 'How are you getting on with the Man in the Moon?'

'Kandinski? I hardly ever see him,' Ward said.

'I was talking to the *Time* magazine stringer about Charles,' Cameron

said, cleaning his sunglasses. 'He thought he might do a piece about him.'

'Hasn't Kandinski suffered enough of that sort of thing?' Ward asked moodily.

'Perhaps he has,' Cameron agreed. 'Is he still working on his crossword puzzle? The tablet thing, whatever he calls it.'

Casually, Ward said: 'He has a theory that it should be possible to see the lunar bases. Refuelling points established there by the Venusians over the centuries.'

'Interesting,' Cameron commented.

'They're sited near Copernicus,' Ward went on. 'I know Vandone at Milan is mapping Archimedes and the Imbrium, I thought I might mention it to him at his semester tomorrow.'

Professor Cameron took off his glasses and gazed quizzically at Ward. 'My dear Andrew, what has been going on? Don't tell me you've become one of Charles' converts?'

Ward laughed and shook his head. 'Of course not. Obviously there are no lunar bases or alien space-craft. I don't for a moment believe a word Kandinski says.' He gestured helplessly. 'At the same time I admit I have become involved with him. There's something about Kandinski's personality. On the one hand I can't take him seriously –'

'Oh, I take him seriously,' Cameron cut in smoothly. 'Very seriously indeed, if not quite in the sense you mean.' Cameron turned his back on the sidewalk crowds. 'Jung's views on flying saucers are very illuminating, Andrew; they'd help you to understand Kandinski. Jung believes that civilization now stands at the conclusion of a Platonic Great Year, at the eclipse of the sign of Pisces which has dominated the Christian epoch, and that we are entering the sign of Aquarius, a period of confusion and psychic chaos. He remarks that throughout history, at all times of uncertainty and discord, cosmic space vehicles have been seen approaching Earth, and that in a few extreme cases actual meetings with their occupants are supposed to have taken place.'

As Cameron paused, Ward glanced across the tables for Kandinski, but a relief waiter served them and he assumed it was Kandinski's day off.

Cameron continued: 'Most people regard Charles Kandinski as a lunatic, but as a matter of fact he is performing one of the most important roles in the world today, the role of a prophet alerting people of this coming crisis. The real significance of his fantasies, like that of the ban-the-bomb movements, is to be found elsewhere than on the conscious plane, as an expression of the immense psychic forces stirring below the surface of rational life, like the isotactic movements of the continental tables which heralded the major geological transformations.'

Ward shook his head dubiously. 'I can accept that a man such as Freud was a prophet, but Charles Kandinski –?'

'Certainly. Far more than Freud. It's unfortunate for Kandinski, and for

the writers of science fiction for that matter, that they have to perform their tasks of describing the symbols of transformation in a so-called rationalist society, where a scientific, or at least a pesudo-scientific explanation is required *a priori*. And because the true prophet never deals in what may be rationally deduced, people such as Charles are ignored or derided today.'

'It's interesting that Kandinski compared his meeting with the Venusian with Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus,' Ward said.

'He was quite right. In both encounters you see the same mechanism of blinding unconscious revelation. And you can see too that Charles feels the same overwhelming need to spread the Pauline revelation to the world. The Anti-Apollo movement is only now getting under way, but within the next decade it will recruit millions, and men such as Charles Kandinski will be the fathers of its apocalypse.'

'You make him sound like a titanic figure,' Ward remarked quietly. 'I think he's just a lonely, tired man obsessed by something he can't understand. Perhaps he simply needs a few friends to confide in.'

Slowly shaking his head, Cameron tapped the table with his glasses. 'Be warned, Andrew, you'll burn your fingers if you play with Charles' brand of fire. The mana-personalities of history have no time for personal loyalties – the founder of the Christian church made that pretty plain.'

Shortly after seven o'clock that evening Charles Kandinski mounted his bicycle and set off out of Vernon Gardens. The small room in the seedy area where he lived always depressed him on his free days from the Tycho, and as he pedalled along he ignored the shouts from his neighbours sitting out on their balconies with their crates of beer. He knew that his beard and the high, ancient bicycle with its capacious wicker basket made him a grotesque, Quixotic figure, but he felt too preoccupied to care. That morning he had heard that the French translation of *The Landings from Outer Space*, printed at his own cost, had been completely ignored by the Paris press. In addition a jobbing printer in Santa Vera was pressing him for payment for 5,000 anti-Apollo leaflets that had been distributed the previous year.

Above all had come the news on the radio that the target date of the first manned Moon flight had been advanced to 1969, and on the following day would take place the latest and most ambitious of the instrumented lunar flights. The anticipated budget for the Apollo programme (in a moment of grim humour he had calculated that it would pay for the printing of some 1,000 billion leaflets) seemed to double each year, but so far he had found little success in his attempt to alert people to the folly of venturing into space. All that day he had felt sick with frustration and anger.

At the end of the avenue he turned on to the highway which served the asparagus farms lying in the 20-mile strip between Vernon Gardens and the desert. It was a hot empty evening and few cars or trucks passed him. On either side of the road the great lemon-green terraces of asparagus lay

seeping in their moist paddy beds, and occasionally a marsh-hen clacked overhead and dived out of sight.

Five miles along the road he reached the last farmhouse above the edge of the desert. He cycled on to where the road ended 200 yards ahead, dismounted and left the bicycle in a culvert. Slinging his camera over one shoulder, he walked off across the hard ground into the mouth of a small valley.

The boundary between the desert and the farm-strip was irregular. On his left, beyond the rocky slopes, he could hear a motor-reaper purring down one of the mile-long spits of fertile land running into the desert, but the barren terrain and the sense of isolation began to relax him and he forgot the irritations that had plagued him all day.

A keen naturalist, he saw a long-necked sand-crane perched on a spur of shale fifty feet from him and stopped and raised his camera. Peering through the finder he noticed that the light had faded too deeply for a photograph. Curiously, the sand-crane was clearly silhouetted against a circular glow of light which emanated from beyond a low ridge at the end of the valley. This apparently sourceless corona fitfully illuminated the darkening air, as if coming from a lighted mineshaft.

Putting away his camera, Kandinski walked forward, within a few minutes reached the ridge, and began to climb it. The face sloped steeply, and he pulled himself up by the hefts of brush and scrub, kicking away footholds in the rocky surface.

Just before he reached the crest he felt his heart surge painfully with the exertion, and he lay still for a moment, a sudden feeling of dizziness spinning in his head. He waited until the spasm subsided, shivering faintly in the cool air, an unfamiliar undertone of uneasiness in his mind. The air seemed to vibrate strangely with an intense inaudible music that pressed upon his temples. Rubbing his forehead, he lifted himself over the crest.

The ridge he had climbed was U-shaped and about 200 feet across, its open end away from him. Resting on the sandy floor in its centre was an enormous metal disc, over 100 feet in diameter and 30 feet high. It seemed to be balanced on a huge conical boss, half of which had already sunk into the sand. A fluted rim ran around the edge of the disc and separated the upper and lower curvatures, which were revolving rapidly in opposite directions, throwing off magnificent flashes of silver light.

Kandinski lay still, as his first feeling of fear retreated and his courage and presence of mind returned. The inaudible piercing music had faded, and his mind felt brilliantly clear. His eyes ran rapidly over the space-ship, and he estimated that it was over twice the size of the craft he had seen three years earlier. There were no markings or ports on the carapace, but he was certain it had not come from Venus.

Kandinski lay watching the space-craft for ten minutes, trying to decide upon his best course of action. Unfortunately he had smashed the lens of his camera. Finally, pushing himself backwards, he slid slowly down the

slope. When he reached the floor he could still hear the whine of the rotors. Hiding in the pools of shadow, he made his way up the valley, and two hundred yards from the ridge he broke into a run.

He returned the way he had come, his great legs carrying him across the ruts and boulders, seized his bicycle from the culvert and pedalled rapidly towards the farmhouse.

A single light shone in an upstairs room and he pressed one hand to the bell and pounded on the screen door with the other, nearly tearing it from its hinges. Eventually a young woman appeared. She came down the stairs reluctantly, uncertain what to make of Kandinski's beard and ragged, dusty clothes.

'Telephone!' Kandinski bellowed at her, gasping wildly, as he caught back his breath.

The girl at last unlatched the door and backed away from him nervously. Kandinski lurched past her and staggered blindly around the darkened hall. 'Where is it?' he roared.

The girl switched on the lights and pointed into the sitting room. Kandinski pushed past her and rushed over to it.

Ward played with his brandy glass and discreetly loosened the collar of his dress shirt, listening to Dr MacIntyre of Greenwich Observatory, four seats away on his right, make the third of the after-dinner speeches. Ward was to speak next, and he ran through the opening phrases of his speech, glancing down occasionally to con his notes. At 34 he was the youngest member to address the Congress banquet, and by no means unimpressed by the honour. He looked at the venerable figures to his left and right at the top table, their black jackets and white shirt fronts reflected in the table silver, and saw Professor Cameron wink at him reassuringly.

He was going through his notes for the last time when a steward bent over his shoulder. 'Telephone for you, Dr Ward.'

'I can't take it now,' Ward whispered. 'Tell them to call later.'

'The caller said it was extremely urgent, Doctor. Something about some people from the Neptune arriving.'

'The Neptune?'

'I think that's a hotel in Santa Vera. Maybe the Russian delegates have turned up after all.'

Ward pushed his chair back, made his apologies and slipped away.

Professor Cameron was waiting in the alcove outside the banqueting hall when Ward stepped out of the booth. 'Anything the trouble, Andrew? It's not your father, I hope –'

'It's Kandinski,' Ward said hurriedly. 'He's out in the desert, near the farm-strip. He says he's seen another space vehicle.'

'Oh, is that all.' Cameron shook his head. 'Come on, we'd better get back. The poor fool!'

'Hold on,' Ward said. 'He's got it under observation now. It's on the ground. He told me to call General Wayne at the air base and

alert the Strategic Air Command.' Ward chewed his lip. 'I don't know what to do.'

Cameron took him by the arm. 'Andrew, come on. MacIntyre's winding up.'

'What can we do, though?' Ward asked. 'He seemed all right, but then he said that he thought they were hostile. That sounds a little sinister.'

'Andrew!' Cameron snapped. 'What's the matter with you? Leave Kandinski to himself. You can't go now. It would be unpardonable rudeness.'

'I've got to help Kandinski,' Ward insisted. 'I'm sure he needs it this time.' He wrenched himself away from Cameron.

'Ward!' Professor Cameron called. 'For God's sake, come back!' He followed Ward onto the balcony and watched him run down the steps and disappear across the lawn into the darkness.

As the wheels of the car thudded over the deep ruts, Ward cut the headlights and searched the dark hills which marked the desert's edge. The warm glitter of Vernon Gardens lay behind him and only a few isolated lights shone in the darkness on either side of the road. He passed the farmhouse from which he assumed Kandinski had telephoned, then drove on slowly until he saw the bicycle Kandinski had left for him.

It took him several minutes to mount the huge machine, his feet well clear of the pedals for most of their stroke. Laboriously he covered a hundred yards, and after careering helplessly into a clump of scrub was forced to dismount and continue on foot.

Kandinski had told him that the ridge was about a mile up the valley. It was almost night and the starlight reflected off the hills lit the valley with fleeting, vivid colours. He ran on heavily, the only sounds he could hear were those of a thresher rattling like a giant metal insect half a mile behind him. Filling his lungs, he pushed on across the last hundred yards.

Kandinski was still lying on the edge of the ridge, watching the space-ship and waiting impatiently for Ward. Below him in the hollow the upper and lower rotor sections swung around more slowly, at about one revolution per second. The space-ship had sunk a further ten feet into the desert floor and he was now on the same level as the observation dome. A single finger of light poked out into the darkness, circling the ridge walls in jerky sweeps.

Then out of the valley behind him he saw someone stumbling along towards the ridge at a broken run. Suddenly a feeling of triumph and exhilaration came over him, and he knew that at last he had his witness.

Ward climbed up the slope to where he could see Kandinski. Twice he lost his grip and slithered downwards helplessly, tearing his hands on the gritty surface. Kandinski was lying flat on his chest, his head just above the ridge. Covered by dust, he was barely distinguishable from the slope itself.

'Are you all right?' Ward whispered. He pulled off his bow tie and ripped open his collar. When he had controlled his breathing he crawled up beside Kandinski.

'Where?' he asked.

Kandinski pointed down into the hollow.

Ward raised his head, levering himself up on his elbows. For a few seconds he peered out into the darkness, and then drew his head back.

'You see it?' Kandinski whispered. His voice was short and laboured. When Ward hesitated before replying he suddenly seized Ward's wrist in a vice-like grip. In the faint light reflected by the white dust on the ridge Ward could see plainly his bright inflamed eyes.

'Ward! Can you see it?'

The powerful fingers remained clamped to his wrist as he lay beside Kandinski and gazed down into the darkness.

Below the compartment window one of Ward's fellow passengers was being seen off by a group of friends, and the young women in bright hats and bandanas and the men in slacks and beach sandals made him feel that he was leaving a seaside resort at the end of a holiday. From the window he could see the observatory domes of Mount Vernon rising out of the trees, and he identified the white brickwork of the Hoyle Library a thousand feet below the summit. Edna Cameron had brought him to the station, but he had asked her not to come onto the platform, and she had said goodbye and driven off. Cameron himself he had seen only once, when he had collected his books from the Institute.

Trying to forget it all, Ward noted thankfully that the train would leave within five minutes. He took his bankbook out of his wallet and counted the last week's withdrawals. He winced at the largest item, 600 dollars which he had transferred to Kandinski's account to pay for the cablegrams.

Deciding to buy something to read, he left the car and walked back to the news-stand. Several of the magazines contained what could only be described as discouraging articles about himself, and he chose two or three newspapers.

Just then someone put a hand on his shoulder. He turned and saw Kandinski.

'Are you leaving?' Kandinski asked quietly. He had trimmed his beard so that only a pale vestige of the original bloom remained, revealing his high bony cheekbones. His face seemed almost fifteen years younger, thinner and more drawn, but at the same time composed, like that of a man recovering slowly from the attack of some intermittent fever.

'I'm sorry, Charles,' Ward said as they walked back to the car. 'I should have said goodbye to you but I thought I'd better not.'

Kandinski's expression was subdued but puzzled. 'Why?' he asked. 'I don't understand.'

Ward shrugged. 'I'm afraid everything here has more or less come to

an end for me, Charles. I'm going back to Princeton until the spring. Freshman physics.' He smiled ruefully at himself. 'Boyle's Law, Young's Modulus, getting right back to fundamentals. Not a bad idea, perhaps.'

'But why are you leaving?' Kandinski pressed.

'Well, Cameron thought it might be tactful of me to leave. After our statement to the Secretary-General was published in *The New York Times* I became very much *persona non grata* at the Hubble. The trustees were on to Professor Renthall again this morning.'

Kandinski smiled and seemed relieved. 'What does the Hubble matter?' he scoffed. 'We have more important work to do. You know, Ward, when Mrs Cameron told me just now that you were leaving I couldn't believe it.'

'I'm sorry, Charles, but it's true.'

'Ward,' Kandinski insisted. 'You can't leave. The Primes will be returning soon. We must prepare for them.'

'I know, Charles, and I wish I could stay.' They reached the car and Ward put his hand out. 'Thanks for coming to see me off.'

Kandinski held his hand tightly. 'Andrew, tell me the truth. Are you afraid of what people will think of you? Is that why you want to leave? Haven't you enough courage and faith in yourself?'

'Perhaps that's it,' Ward conceded, wishing the train would start. He reached for the rail and began to climb into the car but Kandinski held him.

'Ward, you can't drop your responsibilities like this!'

'Please, Charles,' Ward said, feeling his temper rising. He pulled his hand away but Kandinski seized him by the shoulder and almost dragged him off the car.

Ward wrenched himself away. 'Leave me alone!' he snapped fiercely. 'I saw your space-ship, didn't I?'

Kandinski watched him go, a hand picking at his vanished beard, completely perplexed.

Whistles sounded, and the train began to edge forward.

'Goodbye, Charles,' Ward called down. 'Let me know if you see anything else.'

He went into the car and took his seat. Only when the train was twenty miles from Mount Vernon did he look out of the window.

1963

END-GAME

After his trial they gave Constantin a villa, an allowance and an executioner. The villa was small and high-walled, and had obviously been used for the purpose before. The allowance was adequate to Constantin's needs – he was never permitted to go out and his meals were prepared for him by a police orderly. The executioner was his own. Most of the time they sat on the enclosed veranda overlooking the narrow stone garden, playing chess with a set of large well-worn pieces.

The executioner's name was Malek. Officially he was Constantin's supervisor, and responsible for maintaining the villa's tenuous contact with the outside world, now hidden from sight beyond the steep walls, and for taking the brief telephone call that came promptly at nine o'clock every morning. However, his real role was no secret between them. A powerful, doughy-faced man with an anonymous expression, Malek at first intensely irritated Constantin, who had been used to dealing with more subtle sets of responses. Malek followed him around the villa, never interfering – unless Constantin tried to bribe the orderly for a prohibited newspaper, when Malek merely gestured with a slight turn of one of his large hands, face registering no disapproval, but cutting off the attempt as irrevocably as a bulkhead – nor making any suggestions as to how Constantin should spend his time. Like a large bear, he sat motionlessly in the lounge in one of the faded armchairs, watching Constantin.

After a week Constantin tired of reading the old novels in the bottom shelf of the bookcase – somewhere among the grey well-thumbed pages he had hoped to find a message from one of his predecessors – and invited Malek to play chess. The set of chipped mahogany pieces reposed on one of the empty shelves of the bookcase, the only item of decoration or recreational equipment in the villa. Apart from the books and the chess set the small six-roomed house was completely devoid of ornament. There were no curtains or picture rails, bedside tables or standard lamps, and the only electrical fittings were the lights recessed behind thick opaque bowls into the ceilings. Obviously the chess set and the row of novels had been provided deliberately, each representing one of the alternative pastimes available to the temporary tenants of the villa. Men of a phlegmatic or philosophical temperament, resigned to the inevitability of their fate, would choose to read the novels, sinking backwards into a self-anaesthetized trance

as they waded through the turgid prose of those nineteenth-century romances.

On the other hand, men of a more volatile and extrovert disposition would obviously prefer to play chess, unable to resist the opportunity to exercise their Machiavellian talents for positional manoeuvre to the last. The games of chess would help to maintain their unconscious optimism and, more subtly, sublimate or divert any attempts at escape.

When Constantin suggested that they play chess Malek promptly agreed, and so they spent the next long month as the late summer turned to autumn. Constantin was glad he had chosen chess; the game brought him into immediate personal involvement with Malek, and like all condemned men he had soon developed a powerful emotional transference on to what effectively was the only person left in his life.

At present it was neither negative nor positive; but a relationship of acute dependence – already Malek's notional personality was becoming overlaid by the associations of all the anonymous but nonetheless potent figures of authority whom Constantin could remember since his earliest childhood: his own father, the priest at the seminary he had seen hanged after the revolution, the first senior commissars, the party secretaries at the ministry of foreign affairs and, ultimately, the members of the central committee themselves. Here, where the anonymous faces had crystallized into those of closely observed colleagues and rivals, the process seemed to come full circle, so that he himself was identified with those shadowy personas who had authorized his death and were now represented by Malek.

Constantin had also, of course, become dominated by another obsession, the need to know: *when*? In the weeks after the trial and sentence he had remained in a curiously euphoric state, too stunned to realize that the dimension of time still existed for him, he had already died *a posteriori*. But gradually the will to live, and his old determination and ruthlessness, which had served him so well for thirty years, reasserted themselves, and he realized that a small hope still remained to him. How long exactly in terms of time he could only guess, but if he could master Malek his survival became a real possibility.

The question remained: When?

Fortunately he could be completely frank with Malek. The first point he established immediately.

'Malek,' he asked on the tenth move one morning, when he had completed his development and was relaxing for a moment. 'Tell me, do you know – when?'

Malek looked up from the board, his large almost bovine eyes gazing blandly at Constantin. 'Yes, Mr Constantin, I know when.' His voice was deep and functional, as expressionless as a weighing machine's.

* * *

Constantin sat back reflectively. Outside the glass panes of the veranda the rain fell steadily on the solitary fir tree which had maintained a precarious purchase among the stones under the wall. A few miles to the south-west of the villa were the outskirts of the small port, one of the dismal so-called 'coastal resorts' where junior ministry men and party hacks were sent for their bi-annual holidays. The weather, however, seemed peculiarly inclement, the sun never shining through the morose clouds, and for a moment, before he checked himself, Constantin felt glad to be within the comparative warmth of the villa.

'Let me get this straight,' he said to Malek. 'You don't merely know in a general sense – for example, after receiving an instruction from so-and-so – but you know *specifically* when?'

'Exactly.' Malek moved his queen out of the game. His chess was sound but without flair or a personal style, suggesting that he had improved merely by practice – most of his opponents, Constantin realized with sardonic amusement, would have been players of a high class.

'You know the *day* and the *hour* and the *minute*,' Constantin pressed. Malek nodded slowly, most of his attention upon the game, and Constantin rested his smooth sharp chin in one hand, watching his opponent. 'It could be within the next ten seconds, or again, it might not be for ten years?'

'As you say.' Malek gestured at the board. 'Your move.'

Constantin waved this aside. 'I know, but don't let's rush it. These games are played on many levels, Malek. People who talk about three-dimensional chess obviously know nothing about the present form.' Occasionally he made these openings in the hope of loosening Malek's tongue, but conversation with him seemed to be impossible.

Abruptly he sat forward across the board, his eyes searching Malek's. 'You alone know the date, Malek, and as you have said, it might not be for ten years – or twenty. Do you think you can keep such a secret to yourself for so long?'

Malek made no attempt to answer this, and waited for Constantin to resume play. Now and then his eyes inspected the corners of the veranda, or glanced at the stone garden outside. From the kitchen came the occasional sounds of the orderly's boots scraping the floor as he lounged by the telephone on the deal table.

As he scrutinized the board Constantin wondered how he could provoke any response whatever from Malek; the man had shown no reaction at the mention of ten years, although the period was ludicrously far ahead. In all probability their real game would be a short one. The indeterminate date of the execution, which imbued the procedure with such a bizarre flavour, was not intended to add an element of torture or suspense to the condemned's last days, but simply to obscure and confuse the very fact of his exit. If a definite date were known in advance there might be a last-minute rally of sympathy, an attempt to review the sentence and perhaps apportion the blame elsewhere, and the unconscious if not conscious sense of complicity in the condemned man's crimes might well

provoke an agonized reappraisal and, after the execution of the sentence, a submerged sense of guilt upon which opportunists and intriguers could play to advantage.

By means of the present system, however, all these dangers and unpleasant side-effects were obviated, the accused was removed from his place in the hierarchy when the opposition to him was at its zenith and conveniently handed over to the judiciary, and thence to one of the courts of star chamber whose proceedings were always held in camera and whose verdicts were never announced.

As far as his former colleagues were concerned, he had disappeared into the endless corridor world of the bureaucratic purgatories, his case permanently on file but never irrevocably closed. Above all, the fact of his guilt was never established and confirmed. As Constantin was aware, he himself had been convicted upon a technicality in the margins of the main indictment against him, a mere procedural device, like a bad twist in the plot of a story, designed solely to bring the investigation to a close. Although he knew the real nature of his crime, Constantin had never been formally notified of his guilt; in fact the court had gone out of its way to avoid preferring any serious charges against him whatever.

This ironic inversion of the classical Kafkaesque situation, by which, instead of admitting his guilt to a non-existent crime, he was forced to connive in a farce maintaining his innocence of offences he knew full well he had committed, was preserved in his present situation at the execution villa.

The psychological basis was more obscure but in some way far more threatening, the executioner beckoning his victim towards him with a beguiling smile, reassuring him that all was forgiven. Here he played upon, not those unconscious feelings of anxiety and guilt, but that innate conviction of individual survival, that obsessive preoccupation with personal immortality which is merely a disguised form of the universal fear of the image of one's own death. It was this assurance that all was well, and the absence of any charges of guilt or responsibility, which had made so orderly the queues into the gas chambers.

At present the paradoxical face of this diabolical device was worn by Malek, his lumpy amorphous features and neutral but ambiguous attitude making him seem less a separate personality than the personification of the apparat of the state. Perhaps the sardonic title of 'supervisor' was nearer the truth than had seemed at first sight, and that Malek's role was simply to officiate, or at the most serve as moderator, at a trial by ordeal in which Constantin was his own accused, prosecutor and judge.

However, he reflected as he examined the board, aware of Malek's bulky presence across the pieces, this would imply that they had completely misjudged his own personality, with its buoyancy and almost gallic verve and panache. He, of all people, would be the last to take his own life in an orgy of self-confessed guilt. Not for him the neurotic suicide so loved

of the Slav. As long as there were a way out he would cheerfully shoulder any burden of guilt, tolerant of his own weaknesses, ready to shrug them off with a quip. This insouciance had always been his strongest ally.

His eyes searched the board, roving down the open files of the queens and bishops, as if the answer to the pressing enigma were to be found in these polished corridors.

When? His own estimate was two months. Almost certainly, (and he had no fear here that he was rationalizing) it would not be within the next two or three days, nor even the next fortnight. Haste was always unseemly, quite apart from violating the whole purpose of the exercise. Two months would see him safely into limbo, and be sufficiently long for the suspense to break him down and reveal any secret allies, sufficiently brief to fit his particular crime.

Two months? Not as long as he might have wished. As he translated his queen's bishop into play Constantin began to map out his strategy for defeating Malek. The first task, obviously, was to discover when Malek was to carry out the execution, partly to give him peace of mind, but also to allow him to adjust the context of his escape. A physical leap to freedom over the wall would be pointless. Contacts had to be established, pressure brought to bear at various sensitive points in the hierarchy, paving the way for a reconsideration of his case. All this would take time.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sharp movement of Malek's left hand across the board, followed by a guttural grunt. Surprised by the speed and economy with which Malek had moved his piece as much by the fact that he himself was in check, Constantin sat forward and examined his position with more care. He glanced with grudging respect at Malek, who had sat back as impassively as ever, the knight he had deftly taken on the edge of the table in front of him. His eyes watched Constantin with their usual untroubled calm, like those of an immensely patient governess, his great shoulders hidden within the bulky suiting. But for a moment, when he had leaned across the board, Constantin had seen the powerful extension and flexion of his shoulder musculature.

Don't look so smug, my dear Malek, Constantin said to himself with a wry smile. At least I know now that you are left-handed. Malek had taken the knight with one hand, hooking the piece between the thick knuckles of his ring and centre fingers, and then substituting his queen with a smart tap, a movement not easily performed in the centre of the crowded board. Useful though the confirmation was – Constantin had noticed Malek apparently trying to conceal his left-handedness during their meals and when opening and closing the windows – he found this sinistral aspect of Malek's personality curiously disturbing, an indication that there would be nothing predictable about his opponent, or the ensuing struggle of wits between them. Even Malek's apparent lack of sharp intelligence was belied by the astuteness of his last move.

Constantin was playing white, and had chosen the Queen's Gambit,

assuming that the fluid situation invariably resulting from the opening would be to his advantage and allow him to get on with the more serious task of planning his escape. But Malek had avoided any possible errors, steadily consolidating his position, and had even managed to launch a counter-gambit, offering a knight-to-bishop exchange which would soon undermine Constantin's position if he accepted.

'A good move, Malek,' he commented. 'But perhaps a little risky in the long run.' Declining the exchange, he lamely blocked the checking queen with a pawn.

Malek stared stolidly at the board, his heavy policeman's face, with its almost square frame from one jaw angle to the other, betraying no sign of thought. His approach, Constantin reflected as he watched his opponent, would be that of the pragmatist, judging always by immediate capability rather than by any concealed intentions. As if confirming this diagnosis, Malek simply returned his queen to her former square, unwilling or unable to exploit the advantage he had gained and satisfied by the captured piece.

Bored by the lower key on to which the game had descended, and the prospect of similar games ahead, Constantin castled his king to safety. For some reason, obviously irrational, he assumed that Malek would not kill him in the middle of a game, particularly if he, Malek, were winning. He recognized that this was an unconscious reason for wanting to play chess in the first place, and had no doubt motivated the many others who had also sat with Malek on the veranda, listening to the late summer rain. Suppressing a sudden pang of fear, Constantin examined Malek's powerful hands protruding from his cuffs like two joints of meat. If Malek wanted to, he could probably kill Constantin with his bare hands.

That raised a second question, almost as fascinating as the first.

'Malek, another point.' Constantin sat back, searching in his pockets for imaginary cigarettes (none were allowed him). 'Forgive my curiosity, but I am an interested party, as it were –' He flashed Malek his brightest smile, a characteristically incisive thrust modulated by ironic self-deprecation which had been so successful with his secretaries and at ministry receptions, but the assay at humour failed to move Malek. 'Tell me, do you know . . . how –?' Searching for some euphemism, he repeated: 'Do you know how you are going to . . . ?' and then gave up the attempt, cursing Malek to himself for lacking the social grace to rescue him from his awkwardness.

Malek's chin rose slightly, a minimal nod. He showed no signs of being bored or irritated by Constantin's laboured catechism, or of having noticed his embarrassment.

'What is it, then?' Constantin pressed, recovering himself. 'Pistol, pill or–' with a harsh laugh he pointed through the window '– do you set up a guillotine in the rain? I'd like to know.'

Malek looked down at the chess-board, his features more glutinous and dough-like than ever. Flatly, he said: 'It has been decided.'

Constantin snorted. 'What on earth does *that* mean?' he snapped belligerently. 'Is it painless?'

For once Malek smiled, a thin sneer of amusement hung fleetingly around his mouth. 'Have you ever killed anything, Mr Constantin?' he asked quietly. 'Yourself, personally, I mean.'

'Touché,' Constantin granted. He laughed deliberately, trying to dispel the tension. 'A perfect reply.' To himself he said: I mustn't let curiosity get the upper hand, the man was laughing at me.

'Of course,' he went on, 'death is always painful. I merely wondered whether, in the legal sense of the term, it would be humane. But I can see that you are a professional, Malek, and the question answers itself. A great relief, believe me. There are so many sadists about, perverts and the like –' again he watched carefully to see if the implied sneer provoked Malek '– that one can't be too grateful for a clean curtain fall. It's good to know. I can devote these last days to putting my affairs in order and coming to terms with the world. If only I knew how long there was left I could make my preparations accordingly. One can't be forever saying one's last prayers. You see my point?'

Colourlessly, Malek said: 'The Prosecutor-General advised you to make your final arrangements immediately after the trial.'

'But what does that mean?' Constantin asked, pitching his voice a calculated octave higher. 'I'm a human being, not a book-keeper's ledger that can be totted up and left to await the auditor's pleasure. I wonder if you realize, Malek, the courage this situation demands from me? It's easy for you to sit there –'

Abruptly Malek stood up, sending a shiver of terror through Constantin. With a glance at the sealed windows, he moved around the chess table towards the lounge. 'We will postpone the game,' he said. Nodding to Constantin, he went off towards the kitchen where the orderly was preparing lunch.

Constantin listened to his shoes squeaking faintly across the unpolished floor, then irritably cleared the pieces off the board and sat back with the black king in his hand. At least he had provoked Malek into leaving him. Thinking this over, he wondered whether to throw caution to the winds and begin to make life intolerable for Malek – it would be easy to pursue him around the villa, arguing hysterically and badgering him with neurotic questions. Sooner or later Malek would snap back, and might give away something of his intentions. Alternatively, Constantin could try to freeze him out, treating him with contempt as the hired killer he was, refusing to share a room or his meals with him and insisting on his rights as a former member of the central committee. The method might well be successful. Almost certainly Malek was telling the truth when he said he knew the exact day and minute of Constantin's execution. The order would have been given to him and he would have no discretion to advance or delay the date to suit himself. Malek would be reluctant to report Constantin for difficult behaviour – the reflection on himself was too obvious and his

present post was not one from which he could graciously retire – and in addition not even the Police-President would be able to vary the execution date now that it had been set without convening several meetings. There was then the danger of re-opening Constantin's case. He was not without his allies, or at least those who were prepared to use him for their own advantage.

But despite these considerations, the whole business of play-acting lacked appeal for Constantin. His approach was more serpentine. Besides, if he provoked Malek, uncertainties were introduced, of which there were already far too many.

He noticed the supervisor enter the lounge and sit down quietly in one of the grey armchairs, his face, half-hidden in the shadows, turned towards Constantin. He seemed indifferent to the normal pressures of boredom and fatigue (luckily for himself, Constantin reflected – an impatient man would have pulled the trigger on the morning of the second day), and content to sit about in the armchairs, watching Constantin as the grey rain fell outside and the damp leaves gathered against the walls. The difficulties of establishing a relationship with Malek – and some sort of relationship was essential before Constantin could begin to think of escape – seemed insuperable, only the games of chess offering an opportunity.

Placing the black king on his own king's square, Constantin called out: 'Malek, I'm ready for another game, if you are.'

Malek pushed himself out of the chair with his long arms, and then took his place across the board. For a moment he scrutinized Constantin with a level glance, as if ascertaining that there would be no further outbursts of temper, and then began to set up the white pieces, apparently prepared to ignore the fact that Constantin had cleared the previous game before its completion.

He opened with a stolid Ruy Lopez, an over-analysed and uninteresting attack, but a dozen moves later, when they broke off for lunch, he had already forced Constantin to castle on the Queen's side and had established a powerful position in the centre.

As they took their lunch together at the card table behind the sofa in the lounge, Constantin reflected upon this curious element which had been introduced into his relationship with Malek. While trying to check any tendency to magnify an insignificant triviality into a major symbol, he realized that Malek's proficiency at chess, and his ability to produce powerful combinations out of pedestrian openings, was symptomatic of his concealed power over Constantin.

The drab villa in the thin autumn rain, the faded furniture and unimaginative food they were now mechanically consuming, the whole grey limbo with its slender telephone connection with the outside world were, like his chess, exact extensions of Malek's personality, yet permeated with secret passages and doors. The unexpected thrived in such an ambience. At any moment, as he shaved, the mirror might retract to reveal the flaming

muzzle of a machine pistol, or the slightly bitter flavour of the soup they were drinking might be other than that of lentils.

These thoughts preoccupied him as the afternoon light began to fade in the east, the white rectangle of the garden wall illuminated against this dim backdrop like a huge tabula rasa. Excusing himself from the chess game, Constantin feigned a headache and retired to his room upstairs.

The door between his room and Malek's had been removed, and as he lay on the bed he was conscious of the supervisor sitting in his chair with his back to the window. Perhaps it was Malek's presence which prevented him from gaining any real rest, and when he rose several hours later and returned to the veranda he felt tired and possessed by a deepening sense of foreboding.

With an effort he rallied his spirits, and by concentrating his whole attention on the game was able to extract what appeared to be a drawn position. Although the game was adjourned without comment from either player, Malek seemed to concede by his manner that he had lost his advantage, lingering for a perceptible moment over the board when Constantin rose from the table.

The lesson of all this was not lost to Constantin the following day. He was fully aware that the games of chess were not only taxing his energies but providing Malek with a greater hold upon himself than he upon Malek. Although the pieces stood where they had left them the previous evening, Constantin did not suggest that they resume play. Malek made no move towards the board, apparently indifferent to whether the game was finished or not. Most of the time he sat next to Constantin by the single radiator in the lounge, occasionally going off to confer with the orderly in the kitchen. As usual the telephone rang briefly each morning, but otherwise there were no callers or visitors to the villa. To all intents it remained suspended in a perfect vacuum.

It was this unvarying nature of their daily routines which Constantin found particularly depressing. Intermittently over the next few days he played chess with Malek, invariably finding himself in a losing position, but the focus of his attention was elsewhere, upon the enigma cloaked by Malek's expressionless face. Around him a thousand invisible clocks raced onwards towards their beckoning zeros, a soundless thunder like the drumming of apocalyptic hoof-irons.

His mood of foreboding had given way to one of mounting fear, all the more terrifying because, despite Malek's real role, it seemed completely sourceless. He found himself unable to concentrate for more than a few minutes upon any task, left his meals unfinished and fidgeted helplessly by the veranda window. The slightest movement by Malek would make his nerves thrill with anguish; if the supervisor left his customary seat in the lounge to speak to the orderly Constantin would find himself almost paralysed by the tension, helplessly counting the seconds until Malek returned. Once, during one of their meals,

Malek started to ask him for the salt and Constantin almost choked to death.

The ironic humour of this near-fatality reminded Constantin that almost half of his two-month sentence had elapsed. But his crude attempts to obtain a pencil from the orderly and later, failing this, to mark the letters in a page torn from one of the novels were intercepted by Malek, and he realized that short of defeating the two policemen in single-handed combat he had no means of escaping his ever more imminent fate.

Latterly he had noticed that Malek's movements and general activity around the villa seemed to have quickened. He still sat for long periods in the armchair, observing Constantin, but his formerly impassive presence was graced by gestures and inclinations of the head that seemed to reflect a heightened cerebral activity, as if he were preparing himself for some long-awaited denouement. Even the heavy musculature of his face seemed to have relaxed and grown sleeker, his sharp mobile eyes, like those of an experienced senior inspector of police, roving constantly about the rooms.

Despite his efforts, however, Constantin was unable to galvanize himself into any defensive action. He could see clearly that Malek and himself had entered a new phase in their relationship, and that at any moment their outwardly formal and polite behaviour would degenerate into a gasping ugly violence, but he was nonetheless immobilized by his own state of terror. The days passed in a blur of uneaten meals and abandoned chess games, their very identity blotting out any sense of time or progression, the watching figure of Malek always before him.

Every morning, when he woke after two or three hours of sleep to find his consciousness still intact, a discovery almost painful in its relief and poignancy, he would be immediately aware of Malek standing in the next room, then waiting discreetly in the hallway as Constantin shaved in the bathroom (also without its door) following him downstairs to breakfast, his careful reflective tread like that of a hangman descending from his gallows.

After breakfast Constantin would challenge Malek to a game of chess, but after a few moves would begin to play wildly, throwing pieces forwards to be decimated by Malek. At times the supervisor would glance curiously at Constantin, as if wondering whether his charge had lost his reason, and then continue to play his careful exact game, invariably winning or drawing. Dimly Constantin perceived that by losing to Malek he had also surrendered to him psychologically, but the games had now become simply a means of passing the unending days.

Six weeks after they had first begun to play chess, Constantin more by luck than skill succeeded in an extravagant pawn gambit and forced Malek to sacrifice both his centre and any possibility of castling. Roused from his

state of numb anxiety by the temporary victory, Constantin sat forward over the board, irritably waving away the orderly who announced from the door of the lounge that he would serve lunch.

'Tell him to wait, Malek. I mustn't lose my concentration at this point, I've very nearly won the game.'

'Well . . .' Malek glanced at his watch, then over his shoulder at the orderly, who, however, had turned on his heel and returned to the kitchen. He started to stand up. 'It can wait. He's bringing the –'

'No!' Constantin snapped. 'Just give me five minutes, Malek. Damn it, one adjourns on a move, not halfway through it.'

'Very well.' Malek hesitated, after a further glance at his watch. He climbed to his feet. 'I will tell him.'

Constantin concentrated on the board, ignoring the supervisor's retreating figure, the scent of victory clearing his mind. But thirty seconds later he sat up with a start, his heart almost seizing inside his chest.

Malek had gone upstairs! Constantin distinctly remembered him saying he would tell the orderly to delay lunch, but instead he had walked straight up to his bedroom. Not only was it extremely unusual for Constantin to be left unobserved when the orderly was otherwise occupied, but the latter had still not brought in their first luncheon course.

Steadying the table, Constantin stood up, his eyes searching the open doorways in front and behind him. Almost certainly the orderly's announcement of lunch was a signal, and Malek had found a convenient pretext for going upstairs to prepare his execution weapon.

Faced at last by the nemesis he had so long dreaded, Constantin listened for the sounds of Malek's feet descending the staircase. A profound silence enclosed the villa, broken only by the fall of one of the chess pieces to the tiled floor. Outside the sun shone intermittently in the garden, illuminating the broken flagstones of the ornamental pathway and the bare face of the walls. A few stunted weeds flowered among the rubble, their pale colours blanched by the sunlight, and Constantin was suddenly filled by an overwhelming need to escape into the open air for the few last moments before he died. The east wall, lit by the sun's rays, was marked by a faint series of horizontal grooves, the remnants perhaps of a fire escape ladder, and the slender possibility of using these as hand-holds made the enclosed garden, a perfect killing ground, preferable to the frantic claustrophobic nexus of the villa.

Above him, Malek's measured tread moved across the ceiling to the head of the staircase. He paused there and then began to descend the stairs, his steps chosen with a precise and careful rhythm.

Helplessly, Constantin searched the veranda for something that would serve as a weapon. The french windows on to the garden were locked, and a slotted pinion outside secured the left-hand member of the pair to the edge of the sill. If this were raised there was a chance that the windows could be forced outwards.

Scattering the chess pieces onto the floor with a sweep of his hand, Constantin seized the board and folded it together, then stepped over to the window and drove the heavy wooden box through the bottom pane. The report of the bursting glass echoed like a gun shot through the villa. Kneeling down, he pushed his hand through the aperture and tried to lift the pinion, jerking it up and down in its rusty socket. When it failed to clear the sill he forced his head through the broken window and began to heave against it helplessly with his thin shoulders, the fragments of broken glass falling on to his neck.

Behind him a chair was kicked back, and he felt two powerful hands seize his shoulders and pull him away from the window. He struck out hysterically with the chess box, and then was flung head-first to the tiled floor.

His convalescence from this episode was to last most of the following week. For the first three days he remained in bed, recovering his physical identity, waiting for the sprained muscles of his hands and shoulders to repair themselves. When he felt sufficiently strong to leave his bed he went down to the lounge and sat at one end of the sofa, his back to the windows and the thin autumn light.

Malek still remained in attendance, and the orderly prepared his meals as before. Neither of them made any comment upon Constantin's outburst of hysteria, or indeed betrayed any signs that it had taken place, but Constantin realized that he had crossed an important rubicon. His whole relationship with Malek had experienced a profound change. The fear of his own imminent death, and the tantalizing mystery of its precise date which had so obsessed him, had been replaced by a calm acceptance that the judicial processes inaugurated by his trial would take their course and that Malek and the orderly were merely the local agents of this distant apparat. In a sense his sentence and present tenuous existence at the villa were a microcosm of life itself, with its inherent but unfeared uncertainties, its inevitable quietus to be made on a date never known in advance. Seeing his role at the villa in this light Constantin no longer felt afraid at the prospect of his own extinction, fully aware that a change in the political wind could win him a free pardon.

In addition, he realized that Malek, far from being his executioner, a purely formal role, was in fact an intermediary between himself and the hierarchy, and in an important sense a potential ally of Constantin's. As he reformed his defence against the indictment preferred against him at the trial – he knew he had been far too willing to accept the *fait accompli* of his own guilt – he calculated the various ways in which Malek would be able to assist him. There was no doubt in his mind that he had misjudged Malek. With his sharp intelligence and commanding presence, the supervisor was very far from being a hatchet-faced killer – this original impression had been the result of some cloudiness in Constantin's perceptions, an unfortunate myopia

which had cost him two precious months in his task of arranging a re-trial.

Comfortably swathed in his dressing gown, he sat at the card-table in the lounge (they had abandoned the veranda with the colder weather, and a patch of brown paper over the window reminded him of that first circle of purgatory) concentrating on the game of chess. Malek sat opposite him, hands clasped on one knee, his thumbs occasionally circling as he pondered a move. Although no less reticent than he had ever been, his manner seemed to indicate that he understood and confirmed Constantin's reappraisal of the situation. He still followed Constantin around the villa, but his attentions were noticeably more perfunctory, as if he realized that Constantin would not try again to escape.

From the start, Constantin was completely frank with Malek.

'I am convinced, Malek, that the Prosecutor-General was misdirected by the Justice Department, and that the whole basis of the trial was a false one. All but one of the indictments were never formally presented, so I had no opportunity to defend myself. You understand that, Malek? The selection of the capital penalty for one count was purely arbitrary.'

Malek nodded, moving a piece. 'So you have explained, Mr Constantin. I am afraid I do not have a legalistic turn of mind.'

'There's no need for you to,' Constantin assured him. 'The point is obvious. I hope it may be possible to appeal against the court's decision and ask for a re-trial.' Constantin gestured with a piece. 'I criticize myself for accepting the indictments so readily. In effect I made no attempt to defend myself. If only I had done so I am convinced I should have been found innocent.'

Malek murmured non-committally, and gestured towards the board. Constantin resumed play. Most of the games he consistently lost to Malek, but this no longer troubled him and, if anything, only served to reinforce the bonds between them.

Constantin had decided not to ask the supervisor to inform the Justice Department of his request for a re-trial until he had convinced Malek that his case left substantial room for doubt. A premature application would meet with an automatic negative from Malek, whatever his private sympathies. Conversely, once Malek was firmly on his side he would be prepared to risk his reputation with his seniors, and indeed his championing of Constantin's cause would be convincing proof in itself of the latter's innocence.

As Constantin soon found from his one-sided discussions with Malek, arguing over the legal technicalities of the trial, with their infinitely subtle nuances and implications, was an unprofitable method of enlisting Malek's support and he realized that he would have to do so by sheer impress of personality, by his manner, bearing and general conduct, and above all by his confidence of his innocence in the face of the penalty which might at

any moment be imposed upon him. Curiously, this latter pose was not as difficult to maintain as might have been expected; Constantin already felt a surge of conviction in his eventual escape from the villa. Sooner or later Malek would recognize the authenticity of this inner confidence.

To begin with, however, the supervisor remained his usual phlegmatic self. Constantin talked away at him from morning to evening, every third word affirming the probability of his being found 'innocent', but Malek merely nodded with a faint smile and continued to play his errorless chess.

'Malek, I don't want you to think that I challenge the competence of the court to try the charges against me, or that I hold it in disrespect,' he said to the supervisor as they played their usual morning board some two weeks after the incident on the veranda. 'Far from it. But the court must make its decisions within the context of the evidence presented by the prosecutor. And even then, the greatest imponderable remains – the role of the accused. In my case I was, to all intents, not present at the trial, so my innocence is established by *force majeure*. Don't you agree, Malek?'

Malek's eyes searched the pieces on the board, his lips pursing thinly. 'I'm afraid this is above my head, Mr Constantin. Naturally I accept the authority of the court without question.'

'But so do I, Malek. I've made that plain. The real question is simply whether the verdict was justified in the light of the new circumstances I am describing.'

Malek shrugged, apparently more interested in the end-game before them. 'I recommend you to accept the verdict, Mr Constantin. For your peace of mind, you understand.'

Constantin looked away with a gesture of impatience. 'I don't agree, Malek. Besides, a great deal is at stake.' He glanced up at the windows which were drumming in the cold autumn wind. The casements were slightly loose, and the air lanced around them. The villa was poorly heated, only the single radiator in the lounge warming the three rooms downstairs. Already Constantin dreaded the winter. His hands and feet were perpetually cold and he could find no means of warming them.

'Malek, is there any chance of obtaining another heater?' he asked. 'It's none too warm in here. I have a feeling it's going to be a particularly cold winter.'

Malek looked up from the board, his bland grey eyes regarding Constantin with a flicker of curiosity, as if this last remark were one of the few he had heard from Constantin's lips which contained any overtones whatever.

'It is cold,' he agreed at last. 'I will see if I can borrow a heater. This villa is closed for most of the year.'

Constantin pestered him for news of the heater during the following week – partly because the success of his request would have symbolized Malek's

first concession to him – but it failed to materialize. After one palpably lame excuse Malek merely ignored his further reminders. Outside, in the garden, the leaves whirled about the stones in a vortex of chilling air, and overhead the low clouds raced seaward. The two men in the lounge hunched over their chess-board by the radiator, hands buried in their pockets between moves.

Perhaps it was this darkening weather which made Constantin impatient of Malek's slowness in seeing the point of his argument, and he made his first suggestions that Malek should transmit a formal request for a re-trial to his superiors at the Department of Justice.

'You speak to someone on the telephone every morning, Malek,' he pointed out when Malek demurred. 'There's no difficulty involved. If you're afraid of compromising yourself – though I would have thought that a small price to pay in view of what is at stake – the orderly can pass on a message.'

'It's not feasible, Mr Constantin.' Malek seemed at last to be tiring of the subject. 'I suggest that you –'

'Malek!' Constantin stood up and paced around the lounge. 'Don't you realize that you must? You're literally my only means of contact, if you refuse I'm absolutely powerless, there's no hope of getting a reprieve!'

'The trial has already taken place, Mr Constantin,' Malek pointed out patiently.

'It was a mis-trial! Don't you understand, Malek, I accepted that I was guilty when in fact I was completely innocent!'

Malek looked up from the board, his eyebrows lifting. '*Completely* innocent, Mr Constantin?'

Constantin snapped his fingers. 'Well, virtually innocent. At least in terms of the indictment and trial.'

'But that is merely a technical difference, Mr Constantin. The Department of Justice is concerned with absolutes.'

'Quite right, Malek. I agree entirely.' Constantin nodded approvingly at the supervisor and privately noted his quizzical expression, the first time Malek had displayed a taste for irony.

He was to notice this fresh leit-motiv recurringly during the next days; whenever he raised the subject of his request for a re-trial Malek would counter with one of his deceptively naive queries, trying to establish some minor tangential point, almost as if he were leading Constantin on to a fuller admission. At first Constantin assumed that the supervisor was fishing for information about other members of the hierarchy which he wished to use for his own purposes, but the few titbits he offered were ignored by Malek, and it dawned upon him that Malek was genuinely interested in establishing the sincerity of Constantin's conviction of his own innocence.

He showed no signs, however, of being prepared to contact his superiors at the Department of Justice, and Constantin's impatience continued to

mount. He now used their morning and afternoon chess sessions as an opportunity to hold forth at length on the subject of the shortcomings of the judicial system, using his own case as an illustration, and hammered away at the theme of his innocence, even hinting that Malek might find himself held responsible if by any mischance he was not granted a reprieve.

'The position I find myself in is really most extraordinary,' he told Malek almost exactly two months after his arrival at the villa. 'Everyone else is satisfied with the court's verdict, and yet I alone know that I am innocent. I feel very like someone who is about to be buried alive.'

Malek managed a thin smile across the chess pieces. 'Of course, Mr Constantin, it is possible to convince oneself of anything, given a sufficient incentive.'

'But Malek, I assure you,' Constantin insisted, ignoring the board and concentrating his whole attention upon the supervisor, 'this is no death-cell repentance. Believe me, I know. I have examined the entire case from a thousand perspectives, questioned every possible motive. There is no doubt in my mind. I may once have been prepared to accept the possibility of my guilt but I realize now that I was entirely mistaken – experience encourages us to take too great a responsibility for ourselves, when we fall short of our ideals we become critical of ourselves and ready to assume that we are at fault. How dangerous that can be, Malek, I now know. Only the truly innocent man can really understand the meaning of guilt.'

Constantin stopped and sat back, a slight weariness overtaking him in the cold room. Malek was nodding slowly, a thin and not altogether unsympathetic smile on his lips as if he understood everything Constantin had said. Then he moved a piece, and with a murmured 'excuse me' left his seat and went out of the room.

Drawing the lapels of the dressing gown around his chest, Constantin studied the board with a desultory eye. He noticed that Malek's move appeared to be the first bad one he had made in all their games together, but he felt too tired to make the most of his opportunity. His brief speech to Malek, confirming all he believed, now left nothing more to be said. From now on whatever happened was up to Malek.

'Mr Constantin.'

He turned in his chair and, to his surprise, saw the supervisor standing in the doorway, wearing his long grey overcoat.

'Malek –?' For a moment Constantin felt his heart gallop, and then controlled himself. 'Malek, you've agreed at last, you're going to take me to the Department?'

Malek shook his head, his eyes staring sombrely at Constantin. 'Not exactly. I thought we might look at the garden, Mr Constantin. A breath of fresh air, it will do you good.'

'Of course, Malek, it's kind of you.' Constantin rose a little unsteadily to his feet, and tightened the cord of his dressing gown. 'Pardon my wild hopes.' He tried to smile at Malek, but the supervisor stood by the door, hands in his overcoat pockets, his eyes lowered fractionally from Constantin's face.

They went out on to the veranda towards the french windows. Outside the cold morning air whirled in frantic circles around the small stone yard, the leaves spiralling upwards into the dark sky. To Constantin there seemed little point in going out into the garden, but Malek stood behind him, one hand on the latch.

'Malek.' Something made him turn and face the supervisor. 'You do understand what I mean, when I say I am absolutely innocent. I *know* that.'

'Of course, Mr Constantin.' The supervisor's face was relaxed and almost genial. 'I understand. When you know you are innocent, then you are guilty.'

His hand opened the veranda door on to the whirling leaves.

1963

MINUS ONE

'Where, my God, *where* is he?'

Uttered in a tone of uncontrollable frustration as he paced up and down in front of the high-gabled window behind his desk, this *cri de coeur* of Dr Mellinger, Director of Green Hill Asylum, expressed the consternation of his entire staff at the mysterious disappearance of one of their patients. In the twelve hours that had elapsed since the escape, Dr Mellinger and his subordinates had progressed from surprise and annoyance to acute exasperation, and eventually to a mood of almost euphoric disbelief. To add insult to injury, not only had the patient, James Hinton, succeeded in becoming the first ever to escape from the asylum, but he had managed to do so without leaving any clues as to his route. Thus Dr Mellinger and his staff were tantalized by the possibility that Hinton had never escaped at all and was still safely within the confines of the asylum. At all events, everyone agreed that if Hinton *had* escaped, he had literally vanished into thin air.

However, one small consolation, Dr Mellinger reminded himself as he drummed his fingers on his desk, was that Hinton's disappearance had exposed the shortcomings of the asylum's security systems, and administered a salutary jolt to his heads of departments. As this hapless group, led by the Deputy Director, Dr Normand, filed into his office for the first of the morning's emergency conferences, Dr Mellinger cast a baleful glare at each in turn, but their sleepless faces remained mutely lowered to the carpeting, as if, despairing of finding Hinton anywhere else, they now sought his hiding place in its deep ruby pile.

At least, Dr Mellinger reflected, only one patient had disappeared, a negative sentiment which assumed greater meaning in view of the outcry that would be raised from the world outside when it was discovered that a patient – obviously a homicidal lunatic – had remained at large for over twelve hours before the police were notified.

This decision not to inform the civil authorities, an error of judgement whose culpability seemed to mount as the hours passed, alone prevented Dr Mellinger from finding an immediate scapegoat – a convenient one would have been little Dr Mendelsohn of the Pathology Department, an unimportant branch of the asylum – and sacrificing him on the altar of his own indiscretion. His natural caution, and reluctance to yield an inch of ground unless compelled, had prevented Dr Mellinger from raising

the general alarm during the first hours after Hinton's disappearance, when some doubt still remained whether the latter had actually left the asylum. Although the failure to find Hinton might have been interpreted as a reasonable indication that he had successfully escaped, Dr Mellinger had characteristically refused to accept such faulty logic.

By now, over twelve hours later, his miscalculation had become apparent. As the thin smirk on Dr Normand's face revealed, and as his other subordinates would soon realize, his directorship of the asylum was now at stake. Unless they found Hinton within a few hours he would be placed in an untenable position before both the civil authorities and the trustees.

However, Dr Mellinger reminded himself, it was not without the exercise of considerable guile and resource that he had become Director of Green Hill in the first place.

'Where *is* he?'

Shifting his emphasis from the first of these interrogatories to the second, as if to illustrate that the fruitless search for Hinton's whereabouts had been superseded by an examination of his total existential role in the unhappy farce of which he was the author and principal star, Dr Mellinger turned upon his three breakfastless subordinates.

'Well, have you found him? Don't sit there dozing, gentlemen! You may have had a sleepless night, but I have still to wake from the nightmare.' With this humourless shaft, Dr Mellinger flashed a mordant eye into the rhododendron-lined drive, as if hoping to catch a sudden glimpse of the vanished patient. 'Dr Redpath, your report, please.'

'The search is still continuing, Director.' Dr Redpath, the registrar of the asylum, was nominally in charge of security. 'We have examined the entire grounds, dormitory blocks, garages and outbuildings – even the patients are taking part – but every trace of Hinton has vanished. Reluctantly, I am afraid there is no alternative but to inform the police.'

'Nonsense.' Dr Mellinger took his seat behind the desk, arms outspread and eyes roving the bare top for a minuscule replica of the vanished patient. 'Don't be disheartened by your inability to discover him, Doctor. Until the search is complete we would be wasting the police's time to ask for their help.'

'Of course, Director,' Dr Normand rejoined smoothly, 'but on the other hand, as we have now proved that the missing patient is not within the boundaries of Green Hill, we can conclude, ergo, that he is outside them. In such an event is it perhaps rather a case of *us* helping the police?'

'Not at all, my dear Normand,' Dr Mellinger replied pleasantly. As he mentally elaborated his answer, he realized that he had never trusted or liked his deputy; given the first opportunity he would replace him, most conveniently with Redpath, whose blunders in the 'Hinton affair', as it could be designated, would place him for ever squarely below the Director's thumb. 'If there were any evidence of the means by which Hinton made his escape – knotted sheets or footprints in the flower-beds – we could assume that he was no longer within these walls. But no such

evidence has been found. For all we know – in fact, everything points inescapably to this conclusion – the patient is still within the confines of Green Hill, indeed by rights still within his cell. 'The bars on the window were not cut, and the only way out was through the door, the keys to which remained in the possession of Dr Booth' – he indicated the third member of the trio, a slim young man with a worried expression – 'throughout the period between the last contact with Hinton and the discovery of his disappearance. Dr Booth, as the physician actually responsible for Hinton, you are quite certain you were the last person to visit him?'

Dr Booth nodded reluctantly. His celebrity at having discovered Hinton's escape had long since turned sour. 'At seven o'clock, sir, during my evening round. But the last person to *see* Hinton was the duty nurse half an hour later. However, as no treatment had been prescribed – the patient had been admitted for observation – the door was not unlocked. Shortly after nine o'clock I decided to visit the patient –'

'Why?' Dr Mellinger placed the tips of his fingers together and constructed a cathedral spire and nave. 'This is one of the strangest aspects of the case, Doctor. Why should you have chosen, almost an hour and a half later, to leave your comfortable office on the ground floor and climb three flights of stairs merely to carry out a cursory inspection which could best be left to the duty staff? Your motives puzzle me, Doctor.'

'But, Director –!' Dr Booth was almost on his feet. 'Surely you don't suspect me of colluding in Hinton's escape? I assure you –'

'Doctor, please.' Dr Mellinger raised a smooth white hand. 'Nothing could be further from my mind. Perhaps I should have said: your *unconscious* motives.'

Again the unfortunate Booth protested: 'Director, there were no unconscious motives. I admit I can't remember precisely what prompted me to see Hinton, but it was some perfectly trivial reason. I hardly knew the patient.'

Dr Mellinger bent forwards across the desk. 'That is exactly what I meant, Doctor. To be precise, you did not know Hinton at all.' Dr Mellinger gazed at the distorted reflection of himself in the silver ink-stand. 'Tell me, Dr Booth, how would you describe Hinton's appearance?'

Booth hesitated. 'Well, he was of . . . medium height, if I remember, with . . . yes, brown hair and a pale complexion. His eyes were – I should have to refresh my memory from the file, Director.'

Dr Mellinger nodded. He turned to Redpath. 'Could you describe him, Doctor?'

'I'm afraid not, sir. I never saw the patient.' He gestured to the Deputy Director. 'I believe Dr Normand interviewed him on admission.'

With an effort Dr Normand cast into his memory. 'It was probably my assistant. If I remember, he was a man of average build with no distinguishing features. Neither short, nor tall. Stocky, one might say.' He pursed his lips. 'Yes. Or rather, no. I'm certain it was my assistant.'

'How interesting.' Dr Mellinger had visibly revived, the gleams of ironic humour which flashed from his eyes revealed some potent inner transformation. The burden of irritations and frustrations which had plagued him for the past day seemed to have been lifted. 'Does this mean, Dr Normand, that this entire institution has been mobilized in a search for a man whom no one here could recognize even if they found him? You surprise me, my dear Normand. I was under the impression that you were a man of cool and analytical intelligence, but in your search for Hinton you are obviously employing more arcane powers.'

'But, Director! I cannot be expected to memorize the face of every patient –'

'Enough, enough!' Dr Mellinger stood up with a flourish, and resumed his circuit of the carpet. 'This is all very disturbing. Obviously the whole relationship between Green Hill and its patients must be re-examined. Our patients are not faceless ciphers, gentlemen, but the possessors of unique and vital identities. If we regard them as nonentities and fail to invest them with any personal characteristics, is it surprising that they should seem to disappear? I suggest that we put aside the next few days and dedicate them to a careful re-appraisal. Let us scrutinize all those facile assumptions we make so readily.' Impelled by this vision, Dr Mellinger stepped into the light pouring through the window, as if to expose himself to this new revelation. 'Yes, this is the task that lies before us now; from its successful conclusion will emerge a new Green Hill, a Green Hill without shadows and conspiracies, where patients and physicians stand before each other in mutual trust and responsibility.'

A pregnant silence fell at the conclusion of this homily. At last Dr Redpath cleared his throat, reluctant to disturb Dr Mellinger's sublime communion with himself. 'And Hinton, sir?'

'Hinton? Ah, yes.' Dr Mellinger turned to face them, like a bishop about to bless his congregation. 'Let us see Hinton as an illustration of this process of self-examination, a focus of our re-appraisal.'

'So the search should continue, sir?' Redpath pressed.

'Of course.' For a moment Dr Mellinger's attention wandered. 'Yes, we must find Hinton. He is here somewhere; his essence pervades Green Hill, a vast metaphysical conundrum. Solve it, gentlemen, and you will have solved the mystery of his disappearance.'

For the next hour Dr Mellinger paced the carpet alone, now and then warming his hands at the low fire below the mantelpiece. Its few flames entwined in the chimney like the ideas playing around the periphery of his mind. At last, he felt, a means of breaking through the impasse had offered itself. He had always been certain that Hinton's miraculous disappearance represented more than a simple problem of breached security, and was a symbol of something grievously at fault with the very foundations of Green Hill.

Pursuing these thoughts, Dr Mellinger left his office and made his way

down to the floor below which housed the administrative department. The offices were deserted; the entire staff of the building was taking part in the search. Occasionally the querulous cries of the patients demanding their breakfasts drifted across the warm, insulated air. Fortunately the walls were thick, and the rates charged by the asylum high enough to obviate the need for over-crowding.

Green Hill Asylum (motto, and principal attraction: 'There is a Green Hill Far, Far Away') was one of those institutions which are patronized by the wealthier members of the community and in effect serve the role of private prisons. In such places are confined all those miscreant or unfortunate relatives whose presence would otherwise be a burden or embarrassment: the importunate widows of blacksheep sons, senile maiden aunts, elderly bachelor cousins paying the price for their romantic indiscretions – in short, all those abandoned casualties of the army of privilege. As far as the patrons of Green Hill were concerned, maximum security came first, treatment, if given at all, a bad second. Dr Mellinger's patients had disappeared conveniently from the world, and as long as they remained in this distant limbo those who paid the bills were satisfied. All this made Hinton's escape particularly dangerous.

Stepping through the open doorway of Normand's office, Dr Mellinger ran his eye cursorily around the room. On the desk, hastily opened, was a slim file containing a few documents and a photograph.

For a brief moment Dr Mellinger gazed abstractedly at the file. Then, after a discreet glance into the corridor, he slipped it under his arm and retraced his steps up the empty staircase.

Outside, muted by the dark groves of rhododendrons, the sounds of search and pursuit echoed across the grounds. Opening the file on his desk, Dr Mellinger stared at the photograph, which happened to be lying upside down. Without straightening it, he studied the amorphous features. The nose was straight, the forehead and cheeks symmetrical, the ears a little oversize, but in its inverted position the face lacked any cohesive identity.

Suddenly, as he started to read the file, Dr Mellinger was filled with a deep sense of resentment. The entire subject of Hinton and the man's precarious claims to reality overwhelmed him with a profound nausea. He refused to accept that this mindless cripple with his anonymous features could have been responsible for the confusion and anxiety of the previous day. Was it possible that these few pieces of paper constituted this meagre individual's full claim to reality?

Flinching slightly from the touch of the file to his fingers, Dr Mellinger carried it across to the fireplace. Averting his face, he listened with a deepening sense of relief as the flames flared briefly and subsided.

'My dear Booth! Do come in. It's good of you to spare the time.' With this greeting Dr Mellinger ushered him to a chair beside the fire and proffered his silver cigarette case. 'There's a certain small

matter I wanted to discuss, and you are almost the only person who can help me.'

'Of course, Director,' Booth assured him. 'I am greatly honoured.'

Dr Mellinger seated himself behind his desk. 'It's a very curious case, one of the most unusual I have ever come across. It concerns a patient under your care, I believe.'

'May I ask for his name, sir?'

'Hinton,' Dr Mellinger said, with a sharp glance at Booth.

'Hinton, sir?'

'You show surprise,' Dr Mellinger continued before Booth could reply. 'I find that response particularly interesting.'

'The search is still being carried on,' Booth said uncertainly as Dr Mellinger paused to digest his remarks. 'I'm afraid we've found absolutely no trace of him. Dr Normand thinks we should inform –'

'Ah, yes, Dr Normand.' The Director revived suddenly. 'I have asked him to report to me with Hinton's file as soon as he is free. Dr Booth, does it occur to you that we may be chasing the wrong hare?'

'Sir –?'

'Is it in fact *Hinton* we are after? I wonder, perhaps, whether the search for Hinton is obscuring something larger and more significant, the enigma, as I mentioned yesterday, which lies at the heart of Green Hill and to whose solution we must all now be dedicated.' Dr Mellinger savoured these reflections before continuing. 'Dr Booth, let us for a moment consider the role of Hinton, or to be more precise, the complex of overlapping and adjacent events that we identify loosely by the term "Hinton".'

'Complex, sir? You speak diagnostically?'

'No, Booth. I am now concerned with the phenomenology of Hinton, with his absolute metaphysical essence. To speak more plainly: has it occurred to you, Booth, how little we know of this elusive patient, how scanty the traces he has left of his own identity?'

'True, Director,' Booth agreed. 'I constantly reproach myself for not taking a closer interest in the patient.'

'Not at all, Doctor. I realize how busy you are. I intend to carry out a major reorganization of Green Hill, and I assure you that your tireless work here will not be forgotten. A senior administrative post would, I am sure, suit you excellently.' As Booth sat up, his interest in the conversation increasing several-fold, Dr Mellinger acknowledged his expression of thanks with a discreet nod. 'As I was saying, Doctor, you have so many patients, all wearing the same uniforms, housed in the same wards, and by and large prescribed the same treatment – is it surprising that they should lose their individual identities? If I may make a small confession,' he added with a roguish smile. 'I myself find that all the patients look alike. Why, if Dr Normand or yourself informed me that a new patient by the name of Smith or Brown had arrived, I would automatically furnish him with the standard uniform of identity at Green Hill – those same lustreless eyes and slack mouth, the same amorphous features.'

Unclasping his hands, Dr Mellinger leaned intently across his desk. 'What I am suggesting, Doctor, is that this automatic mechanism may have operated in the case of the so-called Hinton, and that you may have invested an entirely non-existent individual with the fictions of a personality.'

Dr Booth nodded slowly, 'I see, sir. You suspect that Hinton – or what we have called Hinton up to now – was perhaps a confused memory of another patient.' He hesitated doubtfully, and then noticed that Dr Mellinger's eyes were fixed upon him with hypnotic intensity.

'Dr Booth. I ask you: what actual proof have we that Hinton ever existed?'

'Well, sir, there are the . . .' Booth searched about helplessly . . . 'the records in the administrative department. And the case notes.'

Dr Mellinger shook his head with a scornful flourish. 'My dear Booth, you are speaking of mere pieces of paper. These are not proof of a man's identity. A typewriter will invent anything you choose. The only conclusive proof is his physical existence in time and space or, failing that, a distinct memory of his tangible physical presence. Can you honestly say that either of these conditions is fulfilled?'

'No, sir. I suppose I can't. Though I did speak to a patient whom I assumed to be Hinton.'

'But was he?' The Director's voice was resonant and urgent. 'Search your mind, Booth; be honest with yourself. Was it perhaps another patient to whom you spoke? What doctor ever really looks at his patients? In all probability you merely saw Hinton's name on a list and assumed that he sat before you, an intact physical existence like your own.'

There was a knock upon the door. Dr Normand stepped into the office. 'Good afternoon, Director.'

'Ah, Normand. Do come in. Dr Booth and I have been having a most instructive conversation. I really believe we have found a solution to the mystery of Hinton's disappearance.'

Dr Normand nodded cautiously. 'I am most relieved, sir. I was beginning to wonder whether we should inform the civil authorities. It is now nearly forty-eight hours since . . .'

'My dear Normand, I am afraid you are rather out of touch. Our whole attitude to the Hinton case has changed radically. Dr Booth has been so helpful to me. We have been discussing the possibility that an administrative post might be found for him. You have the Hinton file?'

'Er, I regret not, sir,' Normand apologized, his eyes moving from Booth to the Director. 'I gather it's been temporarily displaced. I've instituted a thorough search and it will be brought to you as soon as possible.'

'Thank you, Normand, if you would.' Mellinger took Booth by the arm and led him to the door. 'Now, Doctor, I am most gratified by your perceptiveness. I want you to question your ward staff in the way I have questioned you. Strike through the mists of illusion and false assumption that swirl about their minds. Warn them of those illusions compounded

on illusions which can assume the guise of reality. Remind them, too, that clear minds are required at Green Hill. I will be most surprised if any one of them can put her hand on her heart and swear that Hinton *really* existed.'

After Booth had made his exit, Dr Mellinger returned to his desk. For a moment he failed to notice his deputy.

'Ah, yes, Normand. I wonder where that file is? You didn't bring it?'

'No, sir. As I explained –'

'Well, never mind. But we mustn't become careless, Normand, too much is at stake. Do you realize that without that file we would know literally nothing whatever about Hinton? It would be most awkward.'

'I assure you, sir, the file –'

'Enough, Normand. Don't worry yourself.' Dr Mellinger turned a vulpine smile upon the restless Normand. 'I have the greatest respect for the efficiency of the administrative department under your leadership. I think it unlikely that they should have misplaced it. Tell me, Normand, are you sure that this file ever existed?'

'Certainly, sir,' Normand replied promptly. 'Of course, I have not actually seen it myself, but every patient at Green Hill has a complete personal file.'

'But Normand,' the Director pointed out gently, 'the patient in question is not *at* Green Hill. Whether or not this hypothetical file exists, Hinton does not.'

He stopped and waited as Normand looked up at him, his eyes narrowing.

A week later, Dr Mellinger held a final conference in his office. This was a notably more relaxed gathering; his subordinates lay back in the leather armchairs around the fire, while Dr Mellinger leaned against the desk, supervising the circulation of his best sherry.

'So, gentlemen,' he remarked in conclusion, 'we may look back on the past week as a period of unique self-discovery, a lesson for all of us to remember the true nature of our roles at Green Hill, our dedication to the task of separating reality from illusion. If our patients are haunted by chimeras, let us at least retain absolute clarity of mind, accepting the validity of any proposition only if all our senses corroborate it. Consider the example of the "Hinton affair". Here, by an accumulation of false assumptions, of illusions buttressing illusions, a vast edifice of fantasy was erected around the wholly mythical identity of one patient. This imaginary figure, who by some means we have not discovered – most probably the error of a typist in the records department – was given the name "Hinton", was subsequently furnished with a complete personal identity, a private ward, attendant nurses and doctors. Such was the grip of this substitute world, this concatenation of errors, that when it crumbled and the lack of any substance behind the shadow was discovered, the remaining vacuum was automatically interpreted as the patient's escape.'

Dr Mellinger gestured eloquently, as Normand, Redpath and Booth nodded their agreement. He walked around his desk and took his seat. 'Perhaps, gentlemen, it is fortunate that I remain aloof from the day-to-day affairs of Green Hill. I take no credit upon myself, that I alone was sufficiently detached to consider the full implications of Hinton's disappearance and realize the only possible explanation – *that Hinton had never existed!*'

'A brilliant deduction,' Redpath murmured.

'Without doubt,' echoed Booth.

'A profound insight,' agreed Normand.

There was a sharp knock on the door. With a frown, Dr Mellinger ignored it and resumed his monologue.

'Thank you, gentlemen. Without your assistance that hypothesis, that Hinton was no more than an accumulation of administrative errors, could never have been confirmed.'

The knock on the door repeated itself. A staff sister appeared breathlessly. 'Excuse me, sir. I'm sorry to interrupt you, but –'

Dr Mellinger waved away her apologies. 'Never mind. What is it?'

'A visitor, Dr Mellinger.' She paused as the Director waited impatiently. 'Mrs Hinton, to see her husband.'

For a moment there was consternation. The three men around the fire sat upright, their drinks forgotten, while Dr Mellinger remained stock-still at his desk. A total silence filled the room, only broken by the light tapping of a woman's heels in the corridor outside.

But Dr Mellinger recovered quickly. Standing up, with a grim smile at his colleagues, he said: 'To see Mr Hinton? Impossible, Hinton never existed. The woman must be suffering from terrible delusions; she requires immediate treatment. Show her in.' He turned to his colleagues. 'Gentlemen, we must do everything we can to help her.'

Minus two.

1963

THE SUDDEN AFTERNOON

What surprised Elliott was the suddenness of the attack. Judith and the children had gone down to the coast for the weekend to catch the last of the summer, leaving him alone in the house, and the three days had been a pleasant reverie of silent rooms, meals taken at random hours, and a little mild carpentry in the workshop. He spent Sunday morning reading all the reviews in the newspapers, carefully adding half a dozen titles to the list of books which he knew he would never manage to buy, let alone read. These wistful exercises, like the elaborately prepared martini before lunch, were part of the established ritual of his brief bachelor moments. He decided to take a brisk walk across Hampstead Heath after lunch, returning in time to tidy everything away before Judith arrived that evening.

Instead, a sharp attack of what first appeared to be influenza struck him just before one o'clock. A throbbing headache and a soaring temperature sent him fumbling to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, only to find that Judith had taken the aspirin with her. Sitting on the edge of the bath, forehead in his hands, he nursed the spasm, which seemed to contract the muscles of some inner scalp, compressing his brain like fruit-pulp in a linen bag.

'Judith!' he shouted to the empty house. 'Damn!'

The pain mounted, an intense prickling that drove silver needles through his skull. Helpless for a moment, he propelled himself into the bedroom and climbed fully dressed into the bed, shielding his eyes from the weak sunlight which crossed the Heath.

After a few minutes the attack subsided slightly, leaving him with a nagging migraine and a sense of utter inertia. For the next hour he stared at the reflection of himself in the dressing-table mirror, lying like a trussed steer across the bed. Through the window he watched a small boy playing under the oaks by the edge of the park, patiently trying to catch the spiralling leaves. Twenty yards away a nondescript little man with a dark complexion sat alone on a bench, staring through the trees.

In some way this scene soothed Elliott, and the headache finally dissipated, as if charmed away by the swaying boughs and the leaping figure of the boy.

'Strange . . .' he murmured to himself, still puzzled by the ferocity of the attack. Judith, however, would be sceptical; she had always accused

him of being a hypochondriac. It was a pity she hadn't been there, instead of lying about on the beach at Worthing, but at least the children had been spared the spectacle of their father yelping with agony.

Reluctant to get out of bed and precipitate another attack – perhaps it was due to some virulent but short-lived virus? – Elliott lay back, the scent of his wife's skin on the pillow reminding him of his own childhood and his mother's perfumed hair. He had been brought up in India, and remembered being rowed across a river by his father, the great placid back of the Ganges turning crimson in the late afternoon light. The burnt-earth colours of the Calcutta waterfront were still vivid after an interval of thirty years.

Smiling pleasantly over this memory, and at the image of his father rowing with a rhythmic lulling motion, Elliott gazed upward at the ceiling, only distracted by the distant hoot of a car horn.

Then he sat up abruptly, staring sharply at the room around him.

'Calcutta? What the hell –?'

The memory had been completely false! He had never been to India in his life, or anywhere near the Far East. He had been born in London, and lived there all his life apart from a two-year postgraduate visit to the United States. As for his father, who had been captured by the Germans while fighting with the Eighth Army in North Africa and spent most of the war as a POW, Elliott had seen almost nothing of him until his adolescence.

Yet the memory of being rowed across the Ganges had been extraordinarily strong. Trying to shake off the last residue of the headache, Elliott swung his feet onto the floor. The throbbing had returned slightly, but in a curious way receded as he let the image of the Calcutta waterfront fill his mind. Whatever its source, the landscape was certainly Indian, and he could see the Ganges steps, a clutter of sailing dhows and even a few meagre funeral pyres smoking on the embankment.

But what most surprised him were the emotional associations of this false memory of being rowed by his father, the sense of reassurance that came with each rhythmic motion of the dark figure, whose face was hidden by the shadows of the setting sun.

Wondering where he had collected this powerful visual impression which had somehow translated itself into a memory with unique personal undertones, Elliott left the bedroom and made his way down to the kitchen. It was now half past two, almost too late for lunch, and he stared without interest at the rows of eggs and milk bottles in the refrigerator. After lunch, he decided, he would settle down on the sofa in the lounge and read or watch television.

At the thought of the latter Elliott realized that the false memory of the Ganges was almost certainly a forgotten fragment of a film travelogue, probably one he had seen as a child. The whole sequence of the memory, with its posed shot of the boat cutting through the crimson water and the

long traverse of the waterfront, was typical of the style of the travelogues made in the nineteen-forties, and he could almost see the credit titles coming up with a roll of drums.

Reassured by this, and assuming that the headache had somehow jolted loose this visual memory – the slightly blurred wartime cinema screens had often strained his eyes – Elliott began to prepare his lunch. He ignored the food Judith had left for him and hunted among the spices and pickle jars in the pantry, where he found some rice and a packet of curry powder. Judith had never mastered the intricacies of making a real curry, and Elliott's own occasional attempts had merely elicited amused smiles. Today, however, with ample time on his hands and no interference, he would succeed.

Unhurriedly Elliott began to prepare the dish, and the kitchen soon filled with steam and the savoury odours of curry powder and chutney. Outside, the thin sunlight gave way to darker clouds and the first afternoon rain. The small boy had gone, but the solitary figure under the oaks still sat on the bench, jacket collar turned up around his neck.

Delighted by the simmering brew, Elliott relaxed on his stool, and thought about his medical practice. Normally he would have been obliged to hold an evening surgery, but his locum had arranged to take over for him, much to his relief, as one of the patients had been particularly difficult – a complete neurotic, a hazard faced by every doctor, she had even threatened to report him to the general medical council for misconduct, though the allegations were so grotesque the disciplinary committee would not consider them seriously for a moment.

The curry had been strong, and a sharp pain under the sternum marked the beginning of a bout of indigestion. Cursing his bad luck, Elliott poured a glass of milk, sorry to lose the flavour of the curry.

'You're in bad shape, old sport,' he said to himself with ironic humour. 'You ought to see a doctor.'

With a sudden snap of his fingers he stood up. He had experienced his second false memory! The whole reverie about his medical practice, the locum and the woman patient were absolute fictions, unrelated to anything in his life. Professionally he was a research chemist, employed in the biochemistry department of one of the London cancer institutes, but his contacts with physicians and surgeons were virtually nil.

And yet the impression of having a medical practice, patients and all the other involvements of a busy doctor was remarkably strong and persistent – indeed, far more than a memory, a coherent area of awareness as valid as the image of the biochemistry laboratory.

With a growing sense of unease, Elliott sipped weakly at the tumbler of milk, wondering why these sourceless images, like fragments from the intelligence of some other individual, were impinging themselves on his mind. He went into the lounge and sat down with his back to the window, examining himself with as much professional detachment

as he could muster. Behind him, under the trees in the park, the man on the bench sat silently in the rain, eyed at a safe distance by a wandering mongrel.

After a pause to collect himself, Elliott deliberately began to explore this second false memory. Immediately he noticed that the dyspepsia subsided, as if assuming the *persona* of the fragmented images relieved their pressure upon his mind. Concentrating, he could see a high window above a broad mahogany desk, a padded leather couch, shelves of books and framed certificates on the walls, unmistakably a doctor's consulting rooms. Leaving the room, he passed down a broad flight of carpeted stairs into a marble-floored hall. A desk stood in an alcove on the left, and a pretty red-haired receptionist looked up and smiled to him across her typewriter. Then he was outside in the street, obviously in a well-to-do quarter of the city, where Rolls-Royces and Bentleys almost outnumbered the other cars. Two hundred yards away double-decker buses crossed a familiar intersection.

'Harley Street!' Elliott snapped. As he sat up and looked around at the familiar furniture in the lounge and the drenched oaks in the park, with an effort re-establishing their reality in his mind, he had a last glimpse of the front elevation of the consulting chambers, a blurred nameplate on the cream-painted columns. Over the portico were the gilt italic numerals: *259*

'Two fifty-nine Harley Street? Now who the devil works there?' Elliott stood up and went over to the window, staring out across the Heath, then paced into the kitchen and savoured the residue of the curry aroma. Again a spasm of indigestion gripped his stomach, and he immediately focused on the image of the unknown doctor's consulting rooms. As the pain faded he had a further impression of a small middle-aged woman in a hospital ward, her left arm in a cast, and then a picture of the staff and consultants' entrance to the Middlesex Hospital, as vivid as a photograph.

Picking up the newspaper, Elliott returned to the lounge, settling himself with difficulty. The absolute clarity of the memories convinced him that they were not confused images taken from the ciné-films or elaborated by his imagination. The more he explored them the more they fixed their own reality, refusing to fade or vanish. In addition, the emotional content was too strong. The associations of the childhood river scene were reassuring but the atmosphere in the consulting rooms had been fraught with hesitation and anxiety, as if their original possessor was in the grip of a nightmare.

The headache still tugged at his temples, and Elliott went over to the cocktail cabinet and poured himself a large whisky and soda. Had he in some incredible way simultaneously become the receiver of the disembodied memories of a small Indian boy in Calcutta and a Harley Street consultant?

Glancing at the front news page, his eye caught:

INDIAN DOCTOR SOUGHT
Wife's Mystery Death

Police are continuing their search for the missing Harley Street psychiatrist, Dr Krishnamurti Singh. Scotland Yard believes he may be able to assist them in their inquiries into the death of his wife, Mrs Ramadya Singh . . .

With a surge of relief, Elliott slapped the newspaper and tossed it across the room. So this explained the two imaginary memories! Earlier that morning, before the influenza attack, he had read the news item without realizing it, then during the light fever had dramatized the details. The virulent virus – a rare short-lived strain he had picked up at the laboratory – presumably acted like the hallucinogenic drugs, creating an inner image of almost photographic authenticity. Even the curry had been part of the system of fantasy.

Elliott wandered ruminatively around the lounge, listening to the rain sweep like hail across the windows. Within a few moments he knew that more of these hallucinatory memories lay below the surface of his mind, all revolving around the identity of the missing Indian doctor.

Unable to dispel them, he deliberately let himself drift off into a reverie. Perhaps the association of the funereal rain and the tiresome pain below his sternum was responsible for the gathering sense of foreboding in his mind. Formless ideas rose towards consciousness, and he stirred uneasily in his chair. Without realizing it, he found himself thinking of his wife's death, an event shrouded in pain and a peculiar dream-like violence. For a moment he was almost inside his wife's dying mind, at the bottom of an immense drowned lake, separated from the distant pinpoint of sky by enormous volumes of water that pressed upon his chest . . .

In a flood of sweat, Elliott awoke from this nightmare, the whole tragic vision of his wife's death before his eyes. Judith was alive, of course, staying with her married sister at the beach-house near Worthing, but the vision of her drowning had come through with the force and urgency of a telepathic signal.

'Judith!'

Rousing himself, Elliott hurried to the telephone in the hall. Something about its psychological dimensions convinced him that he had not imagined the death scene.

The sea!

He snatched up the phone, dialling for the operator. At that very moment Judith might well be swimming alone while her sister prepared tea with the children, in sight of the beach but unaware she was in danger . . .

'Operator, this is urgent,' Elliott began. 'I must talk to my wife. I think she's in some sort of danger. Can you get me Calcutta 30331.'

The operator hesitated. 'Calcutta? I'm sorry, caller, I'll transfer you to Overseas –'

'What? I don't want –' Elliott stopped. 'What number did I ask for?'

'Calcutta 30331. I'll have you transferred.'

'Wait!' Elliott steadied himself against the window. The rain beat across the glazed panes. 'My mistake. I meant Worthing 303 –'

'Are you there, caller? Worthing Three Zero Three –' Her voice waited.

Wearily Elliott lowered the telephone. 'I'll look it up,' he said thickly. 'That wasn't the number.'

He turned the pages of the memo pad, realizing that both he and Judith had known the number for years and never bothered to record it.

'Are you there, caller?' The operator's voice was sharper.

A few moments later, when he was connected to Directory Inquiries, Elliott realized that he had also forgotten his sister-in-law's name and address.

'Calcutta 30331.' Elliott repeated the number as he poured himself a drink from the whisky decanter. Pulling himself together, he recognized that the notion of a telepathic message was fatuous. Judith would be perfectly safe, on her way back to London with the children, and he had misinterpreted the vision of the dying woman. The telephone number, however, remained. The enigmatic sequence flowed off his tongue with the unconscious familiarity of long usage. A score of similar memories waited to be summoned into reality, as if a fugitive mind had taken up residence in his brain.

He picked the newspaper off the floor.

. . . Dr Krishnamurti Singh. Scotland Yard believes he may be able to assist them in their inquiries . . .

'Assist them in their inquiries' – a typical Fleet Street euphemism, part of the elaborate code built up between the newspapers and their readers. A French paper, not handicapped by the English libel laws, would be shouting 'Bluebeard! Assassin!'

Detectives are at the bedside of Mrs Ethel Burgess, the charwoman employed by Dr and Mrs Singh, who was yesterday found unconscious at the foot of the stairs . . .

Mrs Burgess! Instantly an image of the small elderly woman, with a face like a wizened apple, came before his eyes. She was lying in the hospital bed at the Middlesex, watching him with frightened reproachful glances –

The tumbler, half-filled with whisky, smashed itself on the fireplace tiles. Elliott stared at the fragments of wet glass around his feet, then sat down in the centre of the sofa with his head in his hands, trying to

hold back the flood of memories. Helplessly he found himself thinking of the medical school at Calcutta. The half-familiar faces of fellow students passed in a blur. He remembered his passionate interest in developing a scientific approach to the obscurer branches of yoga and the Hindu parapsychologies, the student society he formed and its experiments in thought and body transference, brought to an end by the death of one of the students and the subsequent scandal . . .

For a moment Elliott marvelled at the coherence and convincing detail of the memories. Numbly he reminded himself that in fact he had been a chemistry student at –

Where?

With a start he realized that he had forgotten. Quickly he searched his mind, and found he could remember almost nothing of his distant past, where he was born, his parents and childhood. Instead he saw once again, this time with luminous clarity, the rowing-boat on the crimson Ganges and its dark oarsman watching him with his ambiguous smile. Then he saw another picture, of himself as a small boy, writing in a huge ledger in which all the pencilled entries had been laboriously rubbed out, sitting at a desk in a room with a low ceiling of bamboo rods over his father's warehouse by the market –

'Nonsense!' Flinging the memory from him, with all its tender associations, Elliott stood up restless, his heart racing with a sudden fever. His forehead burned with heat, his mind inventing strings of fantasies around the Dr Singh wanted by the police. He felt his pulse, then leaned into the mirror over the mantelpiece and examined his eyes, checking his pupil reflexes with expert fingers for any symptoms of concussion.

Swallowing with a dry tongue, he stared down at the physician's hands which had examined him, then decided to call his own doctor. A sedative, an hour's sleep, and he would recover.

In the falling evening light he could barely see the numerals. 'Hello, hello!' he shouted. 'Is anyone there?'

'Yes, Dr Singh,' a woman replied. 'Is that you?'

Frightened, Elliott cupped his hand over the mouthpiece. He had dialled the number from memory, but from another memory than his own. But not only had the receptionist recognized his voice – Elliott had recognized hers, and knew her name.

Experimentally he lifted the receiver, and said the name in his mind. 'Miss Tremayne –?'

'Dr Singh? Are you –'

With an effort Elliott made his voice more guttural. 'I'm sorry, I have the wrong number. What is your number?'

The girl hesitated. When she spoke the modulation and rhythm of her voice were again instantly familiar. 'This is Harley Street 30331,' she said cautiously. 'Dr Singh, the police have –'

Elliott lowered the telephone into its cradle. Wearily he sat down on the carpet in the darkness, looking up at the black rectangle of the front

door. Again the headache began to drum at his temples, as he tried to ignore the memories crowding into his mind. Above him the staircase led to another world.

Half an hour later, he pulled himself to his feet. Searching for his bed, and fearing the light, he stumbled into a room and lay down. With a start he clambered upright, and found that he was lying on the table in the dining room.

He had forgotten his way around the house, and the topography of another home, apparently a single-storey apartment, had superimposed itself upon his mind. In the strange upstairs floor he found an untidy nursery full of children's toys and clothes, an unremembered frieze of childish drawings which showed tranquil skies over church steeples. When he closed the door the scene vanished like a forgotten tableau.

In the bedroom next door a portrait photograph stood on the dressing table, showing the face of a pleasant blonde-haired woman he had never seen. He gazed down at the bed in the darkness, the wardrobes and mirrors around him like the furniture of a dream.

'Ramadya, Ramadya,' he murmured, on his lips the name of the dying woman.

The telephone rang. Standing in the darkness at the top of the stairs, he listened to its sounds shrilling through the silent house. He walked down to it with leaden feet.

'Yes?' he said tersely.

'Hello, darling,' a woman's bright voice answered. In the background trains shunted and whistled. 'Hello? Is that Hampstead –'

'This is Harley Street 30331,' he said quickly. 'You have the wrong number.'

'Oh, dear, I am sorry, I thought –'

Cutting off this voice, which for a fleeting moment had drawn together the fragmented *persona* clinging to the back of his mind, he stood at the window by the front door. Through the narrow barred pane he could see that the rain had almost ended, and a light mist hung among the trees. The bedraggled figure on the bench still maintained his vigil, his face hidden in the darkness. Now and then his drenched form would glimmer in the passing lights.

For some reason a sense of extreme urgency had overtaken Elliott. He knew that there were a series of tasks to be performed, records to be made before important evidence vanished, reliable witnesses to be contacted. A hundred ignored images passed through in his mind as he searched for a pair of shoes and a jacket in the cupboard upstairs, scenes of his medical practice, a woman patient being tested by an electroencephalogram, the radiator of a Bentley car and its automobile club badges. There were glimpses of the streets near Harley Street, the residue of countless journeys to and from the consulting rooms, the entrance to the Overseas Club, a noisy seminar at one of the scientific institutes where someone was

shouting at him theatrically. Then, unpleasantly, there were feelings of remorse for his wife's death, counterbalanced by the growing inner conviction that this, paradoxically, was the only way to save her, to force her to a new life. In a strange yet familiar voice he heard himself saying: 'the soul, like any soft-skinned creature, clings to whatever shell it can find. Only by cracking that shell can one force it to move to a new . . .'

Attacks of vertigo came over him in waves as he descended the staircase. There was someone he must find, one man whose help might save him. He picked up the telephone and dialled, swaying giddily from side to side.

A clipped voice like polished ivory answered. 'Professor Ramachandran speaking.'

'Professor –'

'Hello? Who is that, please?'

He cleared his throat, coughing noisily into the mouthpiece. 'Professor, understand me! It was the tumour, inoperable, it was the only way to save her – metempsychosis of the somatic function as well as the psychic . . .' He had launched into a semicoherent tirade, the words coming out in clotted shreds. 'Ramadya has gone over now, she is the other woman . . . neither she nor any others will ever know . . . Professor, will you tell her one day, and myself . . . a single word –'

'Dr Singh!' The voice at the end was a shout. 'I can no longer help you! You must take the consequences of your folly! I warned you repeatedly about the danger of your experiments –'

The telephone squeaked on the floor where he dropped it. Outside the headlamps of police cars flashed by, their blue roof lights revolving like spectral beacons. As he unlatched the door and stepped out into the cold night air he had a last obsessive thought, of a fair-haired, middle-aged man with glasses who was a chemist at a cancer institute, a man with a remarkably receptive mind, its open bowl spread before him like a huge dish antenna. This man alone could help him. His name was – Elliott.

As he sat on the bench he saw the lights approaching him through the trees, like glowing aureoles in the darkness. The rain had ended and a light mist dissipated under the branches, but after the warmth indoors it was colder than he expected, and within only a few minutes in the park he began to shiver. Walking between the trees, he saw the line of police cars parked along the perimeter road two hundred yards away. Whichever way he moved, the lights seemed to draw nearer, although never coming directly toward him.

He turned, deciding to return to the house, and to his surprise saw a slim fair-haired man cross the road from the park and climb the steps to the front door. Startled, he watched this intruder disappear through the open door and close it behind him.

Then two policemen stepped from the mist on his right, their torches

dazzling his eyes. He broke into a run, but a third huge figure materialized from behind a trunk and blocked his path.

'That's enough, then,' a gruff voice told him as he wrestled helplessly. 'Let's try to take it quietly.'

Lamps circled the darkness. More police ran over through the trees. An inspector with silver shoulder badges stepped up and peered into his face as a constable raised a torch.

'Dr Singh?'

For a moment he listened to the sounds of the name, which had pursued him all day, hang fleetingly on the damp air. Most of his mind seemed willing to accept the identification, but a small part, now dissolving to a minute speck, like the faint stars veiled by the mist, refused to agree, knowing that whoever he was now, he had once not been Dr Singh.

'No!' He shook his head, and with a galvanic effort managed to wrench loose one arm. He was seized at the shoulder and raised his free arm to shield himself from the lights and the pressing faces.

His glasses had fallen off and been trampled underfoot, but he could see more clearly without them. He looked at his hand. Even in the pale light the darker pigmentation was plain. His fingers were small and neat, an unfamiliar scar marking one of the knuckles.

Then he felt the small goatee beard on his chin.

Inside his mind the last island of resistance slid away into the dark unremembered past.

'Dr Krishnamurti Singh,' the inspector stated.

Among the suitcases in the doorway Judith Elliott watched the police cars drive away toward Hampstead village. Upstairs the two children romped about in the nursery.

'How horrid! I'm glad the children didn't see him arrested. He was struggling like an animal.'

Elliott paid off the taxi-driver and then closed the door. 'Who was it, by the way? No one we know, I hope?'

Judith glanced around the hall, and noticed the telephone receiver on the floor. She bent down and replaced it. 'The taxi-driver said it was some Harley Street psychiatrist. An Indian doctor. Apparently he strangled his wife in the bath. The strange thing is she was already dying of a brain tumour.'

Elliott grimaced. 'Gruesome. Perhaps he was trying to save her pain.'

'By strangling her fully conscious? A typical masculine notion, darling.'

Elliott laughed as they strolled into the lounge. 'Well, my dear, did you have a good time? How was Molly?'

'She was fine. We had a great time together. Missed you, of course. I felt a bit off-colour yesterday, got knocked over by a big wave and swallowed a lot of water.' She hesitated, looking through the window at the park. 'You know, it's rather funny, but twenty minutes ago I tried to ring you

from the station and got a Harley Street number by mistake. I spoke to an Indian. He sounded rather like a doctor.'

Elliott grinned. 'Probably the same man.'

'That's what I thought. But he couldn't have got from Harley Street to Hampstead so quickly, could he? The driver said the police have been looking for him here all afternoon.'

'Maybe they've got the wrong man. Unless there are two Dr Singhs.' Elliott snapped his fingers. 'That's odd, where did I get the name? Must have read about him in the papers.'

Judith nodded, coming over to him. 'It was in this morning's.' She took off her hat and placed it on the mantelpiece. 'Indians are strange people. I don't know why, but yesterday when I was getting over my wave I was thinking about an Indian girl I knew once. All I can remember is her name. Ramadya. I think she was drowned. She was very sweet and pretty.'

'Like you.' Elliott put his hands around her waist, but Judith pointed to the broken glass in the fireplace.

'I say, I can see I've been away.' With a laugh she put her hands on his shoulders and squeezed him, then drew away in alarm.

'Darling, where did you get this peculiar suit? For heaven's sake, look!' She squeezed his jacket, and the water poured from her fingers as from a wet sponge. 'You're soaked through! Where on earth have you been all day?'

1963

THE SCREEN GAME

Every afternoon during the summer at Ciraquito we play the screen game. After lunch today, when the arcades and café terraces were empty and everyone was lying asleep indoors, three of us drove out in Raymond Mayo's Lincoln along the road to Vermilion Sands.

The season had ended, and already the desert had begun to move in again for the summer, drifting against the yellowing shutters of the cigarette kiosks, surrounding the town with immense banks of luminous ash. Along the horizon the flat-topped mesas rose into the sky like the painted cones of a volcano jungle. The beach-houses had been empty for weeks, and abandoned sand-yachts stood in the centre of the lakes, embalmed in the opaque heat. Only the highway showed any signs of activity, the motion sculpture of concrete ribbon unfolding across the landscape.

Twenty miles from Ciraquito, where the highway forks to Red Beach and Vermilion Sands, we turned on to the remains of an old gravel track that ran away among the sand reefs. Only a year earlier this had been a well-kept private road, but the ornamental gateway lay collapsed to one side, and the guardhouse was a nesting place for scorpions and sand-rays.

Few people ever ventured far up the road. Continuous rock slides disturbed the area, and large sections of the surface had slipped away into the reefs. In addition a curious but unmistakable atmosphere of menace hung over the entire zone, marking it off from the remainder of the desert. The hanging galleries of the reefs were more convoluted and sinister, like the tortured demons of medieval cathedrals. Massive towers of obsidian reared over the roadway like stone gallows, their cornices streaked with iron-red dust. The light seemed duller, unlike the rest of the desert, occasionally flaring into a sepulchral glow as if some subterranean fire-cloud had boiled to the surface of the rocks. The surrounding peaks and spires shut out the desert plain, and the only sounds were the echoes of the engine growling among the hills and the piercing cries of the sand-rays wheeling over the open mouths of the reefs like hieratic birds.

For half a mile we followed the road as it wound like a petrified snake above the reefs, and our conversation became more sporadic and fell away entirely, resuming only when we began our descent through a shallow

valley. A few abstract sculptures stood by the roadside. Once these were sonic, responding to the slipstream of a passing car with a series of warning vibratos, but now the Lincoln passed them unrecognized.

Abruptly, around a steep bend, the reefs and peaks vanished, and the wide expanse of an inland sand-lake lay before us, the great summer house of Lagoon West on its shore. Fragments of light haze hung over the dunes like untethered clouds. The tyres cut softly through the cerise sand, and soon we were overrunning what appeared to be the edge of an immense chessboard of black and white marble squares. More statues appeared, some buried to their heads, others toppled from their plinths by the drifting dunes.

Looking out at them this afternoon, I felt, not for the first time, that the whole landscape was compounded of illusion, the hulks of fabulous dreams drifting across it like derelict galleons. As we followed the road towards the lake, the huge wreck of Lagoon West passed us slowly on our left. Its terraces and balconies were deserted, and the once marble-white surface was streaked and lifeless. Staircases ended abruptly in midflight, and the floors hung like sagging marquees.

In the centre of the terrace the screens stood where we had left them the previous afternoon, their zodiacal emblems flashing like serpents. We walked across to them through the hot sunlight. For the next hour we played the screen game, pushing the screens along their intricate pathways, advancing and retreating across the smooth marble floor.

No one watched us, but once, fleetingly, I thought I saw a tall figure in a blue cape hidden in the shadows of a second-floor balcony.

'Emerelda!'

On a sudden impulse I shouted to her, but almost without moving she had vanished among the hibiscus and bougainvillaea. As her name echoed away among the dunes I knew that we had made our last attempt to lure her from the balcony.

'Paul.' Twenty yards away, Raymond and Tony had reached the car. 'Paul, we're leaving.'

Turning my back to them, I looked up at the great bleached hulk of Lagoon West leaning into the sunlight. Somewhere, along the shore of the sand-lake, music was playing faintly, echoing among the exposed quartz veins. A few isolated chords at first, the fragments hung on the afternoon air, the sustained tremolos suspended above my head like the humming of invisible insects.

As the phrases coalesced, I remembered when we had first played the screen game at Lagoon West. I remembered the last tragic battle with the jewelled insects, and I remembered Emerelda Garland . . .

I first saw Emerelda Garland the previous summer, shortly after the film company arrived in Ciraquito and was invited by Charles Van Stratten to use the locations at Lagoon West. The company, Orpheus Productions,

Inc. – known to the aficionados of the café terraces such as Raymond Mayo and Tony Sapphire as the 'ebb tide of the new wave' – was one of those experimental units whose output is destined for a single rapturous showing at the Cannes Film Festival, and who rely for their financial backing on the generosity of the many millionaire dilettantes who apparently feel a compulsive need to cast themselves in the role of Lorenzo de Medici.

Not that there was anything amateurish about the equipment and technical resources of Orpheus Productions. The fleet of location trucks and recording studios which descended on Ciraquito on one of those empty August afternoons looked like the entire D-Day task force, and even the more conservative estimates of the budget for *Aphrodite 80*, the film we helped to make at Lagoon West, amounted to at least twice the gross national product of a Central American republic. What was amateurish was the indifference to normal commercial restraints, and the unswerving dedication to the highest aesthetic standards.

All this, of course, was made possible by the largesse of Charles Van Stratten. To begin with, when we were first co-opted into *Aphrodite 80*, some of us were inclined to be amused by Charles's naive attempts to produce a masterpiece, but later we all realized that there was something touching about Charles's earnestness. None of us, however, was aware of the private tragedy which drove him on through the heat and dust of that summer at Lagoon West, and the grim nemesis waiting behind the canvas floats and stage props.

At the time he became the sole owner of Orpheus Productions, Charles Van Stratten had recently celebrated his fortieth birthday, but to all intents he was still a quiet and serious undergraduate. A scion of one of the world's wealthiest banking families, in his early twenties he had twice been briefly married, first to a Neapolitan countess, and then to a Hollywood starlet, but the most influential figure in Charles's life was his mother. This domineering harridan, who sat like an immense ormolu spider in her sombre Edwardian mansion on Park Avenue, surrounded by dark galleries filled with Rubens and Rembrandt, had been widowed shortly after Charles's birth, and obviously regarded Charles as providence's substitute for her husband. Cunningly manipulating a web of trust funds and residuary legacies, she ruthlessly eliminated both Charles's wives (the second committed suicide in a Venetian gondola, the first eloped with his analyst), and then herself died in circumstances of some mystery at the summer-house at Lagoon West.

Despite the immense publicity attached to the Van Stratten family, little was ever known about the old dowager's death – officially she tripped over a second-floor balcony – and Charles retired completely from the limelight of international celebrity for the next five years. Now and then he would emerge briefly at the Venice Biennale, or serve as co-sponsor of some cultural foundation, but otherwise he retreated into the vacuum left by his mother's death. Rumour had it – at least in Ciraquito – that

Charles himself had been responsible for her quietus, as if revenging (how long overdue!) the tragedy of Oedipus, when the dowager, scenting the prospect of a third liaison, had descended like Jocasta upon Lagoon West and caught Charles and his paramour *in flagrante.*

Much as I liked the story, the first glimpse of Charles Van Stratten dispelled the possibility. Five years after his mother's death, Charles still behaved as if she were watching his every movement through tripod-mounted opera glasses on some distant balcony. His youthful figure was a little more portly, but his handsome aristocratic face, its strong jaw belied by an indefinable weakness around the mouth, seemed somehow daunted and indecisive, as if he lacked complete conviction in his own identity.

Shortly after the arrival in Ciraquito of Orpheus Productions, the property manager visited the cafés in the artists' quarters, canvassing for scenic designers. Like most of the painters in Ciraquito and Vermilion Sands, I was passing through one of my longer creative pauses. I had stayed on in the town after the season ended, idling away the long, empty afternoons under the awning at the Café Fresco, and was already showing symptoms of beach fatigue – irreversible boredom and inertia. The prospect of actual work seemed almost a novelty.

'*Aphrodite 80,*' Raymond Mayo explained when he returned to our table after a kerb-side discussion. 'The whole thing reeks of integrity – they want local artists to paint the flats, large abstract designs for the desert backgrounds. They'll pay a dollar per square foot.'

'That's rather mean,' I commented.

'The property manager apologized, but Van Stratten is a millionaire – money means nothing to him. If it's any consolation, Raphael and Michelangelo were paid a smaller rate for the Sistine Chapel.'

'Van Stratten has a bigger budget,' Tony Sapphire reminded him. 'Besides, the modern painter is a more complex type, his integrity needs to be buttressed by substantial assurances. Is Paul a painter in the tradition of Leonardo and Larry Rivers, or a cut-price dauber?'

Moodily we watched the distant figure of the property manager move from café to café.

'How many square feet do they want?' I asked.

'About a million,' Raymond said.

Later that afternoon, as we turned off the Red Beach road and were waved on past the guardhouse to Lagoon West, we could hear the sonic sculptures high among the reefs echoing and hooting to the cavalcade of cars speeding over the hills. Droves of startled rays scattered in the air like clouds of exploding soot, their frantic cries lost among the spires and reefs. Preoccupied by the prospect of our vast fees – I had hastily sworn in Tony and Raymond as my assistants – we barely noticed the strange landscape we were crossing, the great gargoyles of red basalt that uncoiled themselves into the air like the spires of demented cathedrals. From the

Red Beach – Vermilion Sands highway – the hills seemed permanently veiled by the sand haze, and Lagoon West, although given a brief notoriety by the death of Mrs Van Stratten, remained isolated and unknown. From the beach-houses on the southern shore of the sand-lake two miles away, the distant terraces and tiered balconies of the summer-house could just be seen across the fused sand, jutting into the cerise evening sky like a stack of dominoes. There was no access to the house along the beach. Quartz veins cut deep fissures into the surface, the reefs of ragged sandstone reared into the air like the rusting skeletons of forgotten ships.

The whole of Lagoon West was a continuous slide area. Periodically a soft boom would disturb the morning silence as one of the galleries of compacted sand, its intricate grottoes and colonnades like an inverted baroque palace, would suddenly dissolve and avalanche gently into the internal precipice below. Most years Charles Van Stratten was away in Europe, and the house was believed to be empty. The only sound the occupants of the beach villas would hear was the faint music of the sonic sculptures carried across the lake by the thermal rollers.

It was to this landscape, with its imperceptible transition between the real and the superreal, that Charles Van Stratten had brought the camera crews and location vans of Orpheus Productions, Inc. As the Lincoln joined the column of cars moving towards the summer-house, we could see the great canvas hoardings, at least two hundred yards wide and thirty feet high, which a team of construction workers was erecting among the reefs a quarter of a mile from the house. Decorated with abstract symbols, these would serve as backdrops to the action, and form a fragmentary labyrinth winding in and out of the hills and dunes.

One of the large terraces below the summer-house served as a parking lot, and we made our way through the unloading crews to where a group of men in crocodile-skin slacks and raffia shirts – then the uniform of avant-garde film men – were gathered around a heavily jowled man like a perspiring bear who was holding a stack of script boards under one arm and gesticulating wildly with the other. This was Orson Kanin, director of *Aphrodite* 80 and co-owner with Charles Van Stratten of Orpheus Productions. Sometime *enfant terrible* of the futurist cinema, but now a portly barrel-stomached fifty, Kanin had made his reputation some twenty years earlier with *Blind Orpheus*, a neo-Freudian, horror-film version of the Greek legend. According to Kanin's interpretation, Orpheus deliberately breaks the taboo and looks Eurydice in the face because he wants to be rid of her; in a famous nightmare sequence which projects his unconscious loathing, he becomes increasingly aware of something cold and strange about his resurrected wife, and finds that she is a disintegrating corpse.

As we joined the periphery of the group, a characteristic Kanin script conference was in full swing, a non-stop pantomime of dramatized incidents from the imaginary script, anecdotes, salary promises and bad

puns, all delivered in a rich fruity baritone. Sitting on the balustrade beside Kanin was a handsome, youthful man with a sensitive face whom I recognized to be Charles Van Stratten. Now and then, *sotto voce*, he would interject some comment that would be noted by one of the secretaries and incorporated into Kanin's monologue.

As the conference proceeded I gathered that they would begin to shoot the film in some three weeks' time, and that it would be performed entirely without script. Kanin only seemed perturbed by the fact that no one had yet been found to play the Aphrodite of *Aphrodite* 80 but Charles Van Stratten interposed here to assure Kanin that he himself would provide the actress.

At this eyebrows were raised knowingly. 'Of course,' Raymond murmured. '*Droit de seigneur*. I wonder who the next Mrs Van Stratten is?'

But Charles Van Stratten seemed unaware of these snide undertones. Catching sight of me, he excused himself and came over to us.

'Paul Golding?' He took my hand in a soft but warm grip. We had never met but I presumed he recognized me from the photographs in the art reviews. 'Kanin told me you'd agreed to do the scenery. It's wonderfully encouraging.' He spoke in a light, pleasant voice absolutely without affectation. 'There's so much confusion here it's a relief to know that at least the scenic designs will be first-class.' Before I could demur he took my arm and began to walk away along the terrace towards the hoardings in the distance. 'Let's get some air. Kanin will keep this up for a couple of hours at least.'

Leaving Raymond and Tony, I followed him across the huge marble squares.

'Kanin keeps worrying about his leading actress,' he went on. 'Kanin always marries his latest protégé – he claims it's the only way he can make them respond fully to his direction, but I suspect there's an old-fashioned puritan lurking within the cavalier. This time he's going to be disappointed, though not by the actress, may I add. The Aphrodite I have in mind will outshine Milos's.'

'The film sounds rather ambitious,' I commented, 'but I'm sure Kanin is equal to it.'

'Of course he is. He's very nearly a genius, and that should be good enough.' He paused for a moment, hands in the pockets of his dove-grey suit, before translating himself like a chess piece along a diagonal square. 'It's a fascinating subject, you know. The title is misleading, a box-office concession. The film is really Kanin's final examination of the Orpheus legend. The whole question of the illusions which exist in any relationship to make it workable, and of the barriers we willingly accept to hide ourselves from each other. How much reality can we stand?'

We reached one of the huge hoardings that stretched away among the reefs. Jutting upwards from the spires and grottoes, it seemed to shut off half the sky, and already I felt the atmosphere of shifting illusion and reality that enclosed the whole of Lagoon West, the subtle displacement of time

and space. The great hoardings seemed to be both barriers and corridors. Leading away radially from the house and breaking up the landscape, of which they revealed sudden unrelated glimpses, they introduced a curiously appealing element of uncertainty into the placid afternoon, an impression reinforced by the emptiness and enigmatic presence of the summer-house.

Returning to Kanin's conference, we followed the edge of the terrace. Here the sand had drifted over the balustrade which divided the public sector of the grounds from the private. Looking up at the lines of balconies on the south face, I noticed someone standing in the shadows below one of the awnings.

Something flickered brightly from the ground at my feet. Momentarily reflecting the full disc of the sun, like a polished node of sapphire or quartz, the light flashed among the dust, then seemed to dart sideways below the balustrade.

'My God, a scorpion!' I pointed to the insect crouching away from us, the red scythe of its tail beckoning slowly. I assumed that the thickened chitin of the headpiece was reflecting the light, and then saw that a small faceted stone had been set into the skull. As it edged forward into the light, the jewel burned in the sun like an incandescent crystal.

Charles Van Stratten stepped past me. Almost pushing me aside, he glanced towards the shuttered balconies. He feinted deftly with one foot at the scorpion, and before the insect could recover had stamped it into the dust.

'Right, Paul,' he said in a firm voice. 'I think your suggested designs are excellent. You've caught the spirit of the whole thing exactly, as I knew you would.' Buttoning his jacket he made off towards the film unit, barely pausing to scrape the damp husk of the crushed carapace from his shoe.

I caught up with him. 'That scorpion was jewelled,' I said. 'There was a diamond, or zircon, inset in the head.'

He waved impatiently and then took a pair of large sunglasses from his breast pocket. Masked, his face seemed harder and more autocratic, reminding me of our true relationship.

'An illusion, Paul,' he said. 'Some of the insects here are dangerous. You must be more careful.' His point made, he relaxed and flashed me his most winning smile.

Rejoining Tony and Raymond, I watched Charles Van Stratten walk off through the technicians and stores staff. His stride was noticeably more purposive, and he brushed aside an assistant producer without bothering to turn his head.

'Well, Paul.' Raymond greeted me expansively. 'There's no script, no star, no film in the cameras, and no one has the faintest idea what he's supposed to be doing. But there are a million square feet of murals waiting to be painted. It all seems perfectly straightforward.'

I looked back across the terrace to where we had seen the scorpion. 'I suppose it is,' I said.

Somewhere in the dust a jewel glittered brightly.

Two days later I saw another of the jewelled insects.

Suppressing my doubts about Charles Van Stratten, I was busy preparing my designs for the hoardings. Although Raymond's first estimate of a million square feet was exaggerated – less than a tenth of this would be needed – the amount of work and materials required was substantial. In effect I was about to do nothing less than repaint the entire desert.

Each morning I went out to Lagoon West and worked among the reefs, adapting the designs to the contours and colours of the terrain. Most of the time I was alone in the hot sun. After the initial frenzy of activity Orpheus Productions had lost momentum. Kanin had gone off to a film festival at Red Beach and most of the assistant producers and writers had retired to the swimming pool at the Hotel Neptune in Vermilion Sands. Those who remained behind at Lagoon West were now sitting half asleep under the coloured umbrellas erected around the mobile cocktail bar.

The only sign of movement came from Charles Van Stratten, roving tirelessly in his white suit among the reefs and sand spires. Now and then I would hear one of the sonic sculptures on the upper balconies of the summer-house change its note, and turn to see him standing beside it. His sonic profile evoked a strange, soft sequence of chords, interwoven by sharper, almost plaintive notes that drifted away across the still afternoon air towards the labyrinth of great hoardings that now surrounded the summer-house. All day he would wander among them, pacing out the perimeters and diagonals as if trying to square the circle of some private enigma, the director of a Wagnerian psychodrama that would involve us all in its cathartic unfolding.

Shortly after noon, when an intense pall of yellow light lay over the desert, dissolving the colours in its glazed mantle, I sat down on the balustrade, waiting for the meridian to pass. The sand-lake shimmered in the thermal gradients like an immense pool of sluggish wax. A few yards away something flickered in the bright sand, a familiar flare of light. Shielding my eyes, I found the source, the diminutive Promethean bearer of this brilliant corona. The spider, a Black Widow, approached on its stilted legs, a blaze of staccato signals pouring from its crown. It stopped and pivoted, revealing the large sapphire inset into its head.

More points of light flickered. Within a moment the entire terrace sparkled with jewelled light. Quickly I counted a score of the insects – turquoised scorpions, a purple mantis with a giant topaz like a tiered crown, and more than a dozen spiders, pinpoints of emerald and sapphire light lancing from their heads.

Above them, hidden in the shadows among the bougainvillaea on her balcony, a tall white-faced figure in a blue gown looked down at me.

I stepped over the balustrade, carefully avoiding the motionless insects.

Separated from the remainder of the terrace by the west wing of the summer-house, I had entered a new zone, where the bonelike pillars of the loggia, the glimmering surface of the sand-lake, and the jewelled insects enclosed me in a sudden empty limbo.

For a few moments I stood below the balcony from which the insects had emerged, still watched by this strange sybilline figure presiding over her private world. I felt that I had strayed across the margins of a dream, on to an internal landscape of the psyche projected upon the sun-filled terraces around me.

But before I could call to her, footsteps grated softly in the loggia. A dark-haired man of about fifty, with a closed, expressionless face, stood among the columns, his black suit neatly buttoned. He looked down at me with the impassive eyes of a funeral director.

The shutters withdrew upon the balcony, and the jewelled insects returned from their foray. Surrounding me, their brilliant crowns glittered with diamond hardness.

Each afternoon, as I returned from the reefs with my sketch pad, I would see the jewelled insects moving in the sunlight beside the lake, while their blue-robed mistress, the haunted Venus of Lagoon West, watched them from her balcony. Despite the frequency of her appearances, Charles Van Stratten made no attempt to explain her presence. His elaborate preparations for the filming of *Aphrodite* 80 almost complete, he became more and more preoccupied.

An outline scenario had been agreed on. To my surprise the first scene was to be played on the lake terrace, and would take the form of a shadow ballet, for which I painted a series of screens to be moved about like chess pieces. Each was about twelve feet high, a large canvas mounted on a wooden trestle, representing one of the zodiac signs. Like the protagonist of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, trapped in a labyrinth of tilting walls, the Orphic hero of *Aphrodite 80* would appear searching for his lost Eurydice among the shifting time stations.

So the screen game, which we were to play tirelessly on so many occasions, made its appearance. As I completed the last of the screens and watched a group of extras perform the first movements of the game under Charles Van Stratten's directions, I began to realize the extent to which we were all supporting players in a gigantic charade of Charles's devising.

Its real object soon became apparent.

The summer-house was deserted when I drove out to Lagoon West the next weekend, an immense canopy of silence hanging over the lake and the surrounding hills. The twelve screens stood on the terrace above the beach, their vivid, heraldic designs melting into blurred pools of turquoise and carmine which bled away in horizontal layers across the air. Someone had rearranged the screens to form a narrow spiral corridor. As I straightened them, the train of a white

gown disappeared with a startled flourish among the shadows within.

Guessing the probable identity of this pale and nervous intruder, I stepped quietly into the corridor. I pushed back one of the screens, a large Scorpio in royal purple, and suddenly found myself in the centre of the maze, little more than an arm's length from the strange figure I had seen on the balcony. For a moment she failed to notice me. Her exquisite white face, like a marble mask, veined by a faint shadow of violet that seemed like a delicate interior rosework, was raised to the canopy of sunlight which cut across the upper edges of the screens. She wore a long beach-robe, with a flared hood that enclosed her head like a protective bower.

One of the jewelled insects nestled on a fold above her neck. There was a curious glacé immobility about her face, investing the white skin with an almost sepulchral quality, the soft down which covered it like grave's dust.

'Who –?' Startled, she stepped back. The insects scattered at her feet, winking on the floor like a jewelled carpet. She stared at me in surprise, drawing the hood of her gown around her face like an exotic flower withdrawing into its foliage. Conscious of the protective circle of insects, she lifted her chin and composed herself.

'I'm sorry to interrupt you,' I said. 'I didn't realize there was anyone here. I'm flattered that you like the screens.'

The autocratic chin lowered fractionally, and her head, with its swirl of blue hair, emerged from the hood. '*You* painted these?' she confirmed. 'I thought they were Dr Gruber's . . .' She broke off, tired or bored by the effort of translating her thoughts into speech.

'They're for Charles Van Stratten's film,' I explained. '*Aphrodite 80*. The film about Orpheus he's making here.' I added: 'You must ask him to give you a part. You'd be a great adornment.'

'A film?' Her voice cut across mine. 'Listen. Are you sure they are for this film? It's important that I know –'

'Quite sure.' Already I was beginning to find her exhausting. Talking to her was like walking across a floor composed of blocks of varying heights, an analogy reinforced by the squares of the terrace, into which her presence had let another random dimension. 'They're going to film one of the scenes here. Of course,' I volunteered when she greeted this news with a frown, 'you're free to play with the screens. In fact, if you like, I'll paint some for you.'

'Will you?' From the speed of the response I could see that I had at last penetrated to the centre of her attention. 'Can you start today? Paint as many as you can, just like these. Don't change the designs.' She gazed around at the zodiacal symbols looming from the shadows like the murals painted in dust and blood on the walls of a Toltec funeral corridor. 'They're wonderfully alive, sometimes I think they're even more

real than Dr Gruber. Though –' here she faltered '– I don't know how I'll pay you. You see, they don't give me any money.' She smiled at me like an anxious child, then brightened suddenly. She knelt down and picked one of the jewelled scorpions from the floor. 'Would you like one of these?' The flickering insect, with its brilliant ruby crown, tottered unsteadily on her white palm.

Footsteps approached, the firm rap of leather on marble. 'They may be rehearsing today,' I said. 'Why don't you watch? I'll take you on a tour of the sets.'

As I started to pull back the screens I felt the long fingers of her hand on my arm. A mood of acute agitation had come over her.

'Relax,' I said. 'I'll tell them to go away. Don't worry, they won't spoil your game.'

'No! Listen, please!' The insects scattered and darted as the outer circle of screens was pulled back. In a few seconds the whole world of illusion was dismantled and exposed to the hot sunlight.

Behind the Scorpio appeared the watchful face of the dark-suited man. A smile played like a snake on his lips.

'Ah, Miss Emerelda,' he greeted her in a purring voice. 'I think you should come indoors. The afternoon heat is intense and you tire very easily.'

The insects retreated from his black patent shoes. Looking into his eyes, I caught a glimpse of deep reserves of patience, like that of an experienced nurse used to the fractious moods and uncertainties of a chronic invalid.

'Not now,' Emerelda insisted. 'I'll come in a few moments.'

'I've just been describing the screens,' I explained.

'So I gather, Mr Golding,' he rejoined evenly. 'Miss Emerelda,' he called.

For a moment they appeared to have reached deadlock. Emerelda, the jewelled insects at her feet, stood beside me, her hand on my arm, while her guardian waited, the same thin smile on his lips. More footsteps approached. The remaining screens were pushed back and the plump, well-talcumed figure of Charles Van Stratten appeared, his urbane voice raised in greeting.

'What's this – a story conference?' he asked jocularly. He broke off when he saw Emerelda and her guardian. 'Dr Gruber? What's going – Emerelda my dear?'

Smoothly, Dr Gruber interjected. 'Good afternoon, sir. Miss Garland is about to return to her room.'

'Good, good,' Charles exclaimed. For the first time I had known him he seemed unsure of himself. He made a tentative approach to Emerelda, who was staring at him fixedly. She drew her robe around her and stepped quickly through the screens. Charles moved forwards, uncertain whether to follow her.

'Thank you, doctor,' he muttered. There was a flash of patent leather heels, and Charles and I were alone among the screens. On the floor at our feet was a single jewelled mantis. Without thinking, Charles bent down to pick it up, but the insect snapped at him. He withdrew his fingers with a wan smile, as if accepting the finality of Emerelda's departure.

Recognizing me with an effort, Charles pulled himself together. 'Well, Paul, I'm glad you and Emerelda were getting on so well. I knew you'd make an excellent job of the screens.'

We walked out into the sunlight. After a pause he said, 'That is Emerelda Garland; she's lived here since mother died. It was a tragic experience, Dr Gruber thinks she may never recover.'

'He's her doctor?'

Charles nodded. 'One of the best I could find. For some reason Emerelda feels herself responsible for mother's death. She's refused to leave here.'

I pointed to the screens. 'Do you think they help?'

'Of course. Why do you suppose we're here at all?' He lowered his voice, although Lagoon West was deserted. 'Don't tell Kanin yet, but you've just met the star of *Aphrodite 80*.'

'What?' Incredulously, I stopped. 'Emerelda? Do you mean that she's going to play –?'

'Eurydice.' Charles nodded. 'Who better?'

'But Charles, she's . . .' I searched for a discreet term.

'That's exactly the point. Believe me, Paul,' – here Charles smiled at me with an expression of surprising canniness – 'this film is not as abstract as Kanin thinks. In fact, its sole purpose is therapeutic. You see, Emerelda was once a minor film actress, I'm convinced the camera crews and sets will help to carry her back to the past, to the period before her appalling shock. It's the only way left, a sort of total psychodrama. The choice of theme, the Orpheus legend and its associations, fit the situation exactly – I see myself as a latter-day Orpheus trying to rescue my Eurydice from Dr Gruber's hell.' He smiled bleakly, as if aware of the slenderness of the analogy and its faint hopes. 'Emerelda's withdrawn completely into her private world, spends all her time inlaying these insects with her jewels. With luck the screens will lead her out into the rest of this synthetic landscape. After all, if she knows that everything around her is unreal she'll cease to fear it.'

'But can't you simply move her physically from Lagoon West?' I asked. 'Perhaps Gruber is the wrong doctor for her. I can't understand why you've kept her here all these years.'

'I haven't kept her, Paul,' he said earnestly. 'She's clung to this place and its nightmare memories. Now she even refuses to let me come near her.'

We parted and he walked away among the deserted dunes. In the background the great hoardings I had designed shut out the distant reefs and mesas. Huge blocks of colour had been sprayed on to the

designs, superimposing a new landscape upon the desert. The geometric forms loomed and wavered in the haze, like the shifting symbols of a beckoning dream.

As I watched Charles disappear, I felt a sudden sense of pity for his subtle but naive determination. Wondering whether to warn him of his almost certain failure, I rubbed the raw bruises on my arm. While she started at him, Emerelda's fingers had clasped my arm with unmistakable fierceness, her sharp nails locked together like a clamp of daggers.

So, each afternoon, we began to play the screen game, moving the zodiacal emblems to and fro across the terrace. As I sat on the balustrade and watched Emerelda Garland's first tentative approaches, I wondered how far all of us were becoming ensnared by Charles Van Stratten, by the painted desert and the sculpture singing from the aerial terraces of the summer-house. Into all this Emerelda Garland had now emerged, like a beautiful but nervous wraith. First she would slip among the screens as they gathered below her balcony, and then, hidden behind the large Virgo at their centre, would move across the floor towards the lake, enclosed by the shifting pattern of screens.

Once I left my seat beside Charles and joined the game. Gradually I manœuvred my screen, a small Sagittarius, into the centre of the maze where I found Emerelda in a narrow shifting cubicle, swaying from side to side as if entranced by the rhythm of the game, the insects scattered at her feet. When I approached she clasped my hand and ran away down a corridor, her gown falling loosely around her bare shoulders. As the screens once more reached the summer-house, she gathered her train in one hand and disappeared among the columns of the loggia.

Walking back to Charles, I found a jewelled mantis nestling like a brooch on the lapel of my jacket, its crown of amethyst melting in the fading sunlight.

'She's coming out, Paul,' Charles said. 'Already she's accepted the screens, soon she'll be able to leave them.' He frowned at the jewelled mantis on my palm. 'A present from Emerelda. Rather two-edged, I think, those stings are dangerous. Still, she's grateful to you, Paul, as I am. Now I know that only the artist can create an absolute reality. Perhaps you should paint a few more screens.'

'Gladly, Charles, if you're sure that . . .'

But Charles merely nodded to himself and walked away towards the film crew.

During the next days I painted several new screens, duplicating the zodiacal emblems, so that each afternoon the game became progressively slower and more intricate, the thirty screens forming a multiple labyrinth. For a few minutes, at the climax of the game, I would find Emerelda in the dark centre with the screens jostling and tilting around her, the sculpture on the roof hooting in the narrow interval of open sky.

'Why don't you join the game?' I asked Charles. After his earlier elation he was becoming impatient. Each evening as he drove back to Ciraquito the plume of dust behind his speeding Maserati would rise progressively higher into the pale air. He had lost interest in *Aphrodite 80*. Fortunately Kanin had found that the painted desert of Lagoon West could not be reproduced by any existing colour process, and the film was now being shot from models in a rented studio at Red Beach. 'Perhaps if Emerelda saw you in the maze . . .'

'No, no.' Charles shook his head categorically, then stood up and paced about. 'Paul, I'm less sure of this now.'

Unknown to him, I had painted a dozen more screens. Early that morning I had hidden them among the others on the terrace.

Three nights later, tired of conducting my courtship of Emerelda Garland within a painted maze, I drove out to Lagoon West, climbing through the darkened hills whose contorted forms reared in the swinging headlamps like the smoke clouds of some sunken hell. In the distance, beside the lake, the angular terraces of the summer-house hung in the grey opaque air, as if suspended by invisible wires from the indigo clouds which stretched like velvet towards the few faint lights along the beach two miles away.

The sculptures on the upper balconies were almost silent, and I moved past them carefully, drawing only a few muted chords from them, the faint sounds carried from one statue to the next to the roof of the summer-house and then lost on the midnight air.

From the loggia I looked down at the labyrinth of screens, and at the jewelled insects scattered across the terrace, sparkling on the dark marble like the reflection of a star field.

I found Emerelda Garland among the screens, her white face an oval halo in the shadows, almost naked in a silk gown like a veil of moonlight. She was leaning against a huge Taurus with her pale arms outstretched at her sides, like Europa supplicant before the bull, the luminous spectres of the zodiac guard surrounding her. Without moving her head, she watched me approach and take her hands. Her blue hair swirled in the dark wind as we moved through the screens and crossed the staircase into the summer-house. The expression on her face, whose porcelain planes reflected the turquoise light of her eyes, was one of almost terrifying calm, as if she were moving through some inner dreamscape of the psyche with the confidence of a sleepwalker. My arm around her waist, I guided her up the steps to her suite, realizing that I was less her lover than the architect of her fantasies. For a moment the ambiguous nature of my role, and the questionable morality of abducting a beautiful but insane woman, made me hesitate.

We had reached the inner balcony which ringed the central hall of the summer-house. Below us a large sonic-sculpture emitted a tense nervous pulse, as if roused from its midnight silence by my hesitant step.

'Wait!' I pulled Emerelda back from the next flight of stairs, rousing her from her self-hypnotic torpor. 'Up there!'

A silent figure in a dark suit stood at the rail outside the door of Emerelda's suite, the downward inclination of his head clearly perceptible.

'Oh, my God!' With both hands Emerelda clung tightly to my arm, her smooth face seized by a rictus of horror and anticipation. 'She's there . . . for heaven's sake, Paul, take me –'

'It's Gruber!' I snapped. 'Dr Gruber! Emerelda!'

As we recrossed the entrance the train of Emerelda's gown drew a discordant wail from the statue. In the moonlight the insects still flickered like a carpet of diamonds. I held her shoulders, trying to revive her.

'Emerelda! We'll leave here – take you away from Lagoon West and this insane place.' I pointed to my car, parked by the beach among the dunes. 'We'll go to Vermilion Sands or Red Beach, you'll be able to forget Dr Gruber for ever.'

We hurried towards the car, Emerelda's gown gathering up the insects as we swept past them. I heard her short cry in the moonlight and she tore away from me. I stumbled among the flickering insects. From my knees I saw her disappear into the screens.

For the next ten minutes, as I watched from the darkness by the beach, the jewelled insects moved towards her across the terrace, their last light fading like a vanishing night river.

I walked back to my car, and a quiet, white-suited figure appeared among the dunes and waited for me in the cool amber air, hands deep in his jacket pockets.

'You're a better painter than you know,' Charles said when I took my seat behind the wheel. 'On the last two nights she has made the same escape from me.'

He stared reflectively from the window as we drove back to Ciraquito, the sculptures in the canyon keening behind us like banshees.

The next afternoon, as I guessed, Charles Van Stratten at last played the screen game. He arrived shortly after the game had begun, walking through the throng of extras and cameramen near the car park, hands still thrust deep into the pockets of his white suit as if his sudden appearance among the dunes the previous night and his present arrival were continuous in time. He stopped by the balustrade on the opposite side of the terrace, where I sat with Tony Sapphire and Raymond Mayo, and stared pensively at the slow shuttling movements of the game, his grey eyes hidden below their blond brows.

By now there were so many screens in the game – over forty (I had secretly added more in an attempt to save Emerelda) – that most of the movement was confined to the centre of the group, as if emphasizing the self-immolated nature of the ritual. What had begun as a pleasant divertimento, a picturesque introduction to *Aphrodite 80*, had degenerated

into a macabre charade, transforming the terrace into the exercise area of a nightmare.

Discouraged or bored by the slowness of the game, one by one the extras taking part began to drop out, sitting down on the balustrade beside Charles. Eventually only Emerelda was left – in my mind I could see her gliding in and out of the nexus of corridors, protected by the zodiacal deities I had painted – and now and then one of the screens in the centre would tilt slightly.

'You've designed a wonderful trap for her, Paul,' Raymond Mayo mused. 'A cardboard asylum.'

'It was Van Stratten's suggestion. We thought they might help her.'

Somewhere, down by the beach, a sculpture had begun to play, and its plaintive voice echoed over our heads. Several of the older sculptures whose sonic cores had corroded had been broken up and left on the beach, where they had taken root again. When the heat gradients roused them to life they would emit a brief strangled music, fractured parodies of their former song.

'Paul!' Tony Sapphire pointed across the terrace. 'What's going on? There's something –'

Fifty yards from us, Charles Van Stratten had stepped over the balustrade, and now stood out on one of the black marble squares, hands loosely at his sides, like a single chess piece opposing the massed array of the screens. Everyone else had gone, and the three of us were now alone with Charles and the hidden occupant of the screens.

The harsh song of the rogue sculpture still pierced the air. Two miles away, through the haze which partly obscured the distant shore, the beach-houses jutted among the dunes, and the fused surface of the lake, in which so many objects were embedded, seams of jade and obsidian, was like a segment of embalmed time, from which the music of the sculpture was a slowly expiring leak. The heat over the vermilion surface was like molten quartz, stirring sluggishly to reveal the distant mesas and reefs.

The haze cleared and the spires of the sand reefs seemed to loom forward, their red barbs clawing towards us through the air. The light drove through the opaque surface of the lake, illuminating its fossilized veins, and the threnody of the dying sculpture lifted to a climax.

'Emerelda!'

As we stood up, roused by his shout, Charles Van Stratten was running across the terrace. 'Emerelda!'

Before we could move he began to pull back the screens. toppling them backwards on to the ground. Within a few moments the terrace was a mêlée of tearing canvas and collapsing trestles, the huge emblems flung left and right out of his path like disintegrating floats at the end of a carnival.

Only when the original nucleus of half a dozen screens was left did he pause, hands on hips.

'Emerelda!' he shouted thickly.

Raymond turned to me. 'Paul, stop him, for heaven's sake!'

Striding forward, Charles pulled back the last of the screens. We had a sudden glimpse of Emerelda Garland retreating from the inrush of sunlight, her white gown flared around her like the broken wings of some enormous bird. Then, with an explosive flash, a brilliant vortex of light erupted from the floor at Emerelda's feet, a cloud of jewelled spiders and scorpions rose through the air and engulfed Charles Van Stratten.

Hands raised helplessly to shield his head, he raced across the terrace, the armada of jewelled insects pursuing him, spinning and diving on to his head. Just before he disappeared among the dunes by the beach, we saw him for a last terrifying moment, clawing helplessly at the jewelled helmet stitched into his face and shoulders. His voice rang out, a sustained cry on the note of the dying sculptures, lost on the stinging flight of the insects.

We found him among the sculptures, face downwards in the hot sand, the fabric of his white suit lacerated by a hundred punctures. Around him were scattered the jewels and crushed bodies of the insects he had killed, their knotted legs and mandibles like abstract ideograms, the sapphires and zircons dissolving in the light.

His swollen hands were filled with the jewels. The cloud of insects returned to the summer-house, where Dr Gruber's black-suited figure was silhouetted against the sky, poised on the white ledge like some minatory bird of nightmare. The only sounds came from the sculptures, which had picked up Charles Van Stratten's last cry and incorporated it into their own self-requiem.

'. . . "*She . . . killed*" . . .' Raymond stopped, shaking his head in amazement. 'Paul, can you hear them, the words are unmistakable.'

Stepping through the metal barbs of the sculpture, I knelt beside Charles, watching as one of the jewelled scorpions crawled from below his chin and scuttled away across the sand.

'Not him,' I said. 'What he was shouting was "*She killed – Mrs Van Stratten.*" The old dowager, his mother. That's the real clue to this fantastic menage. Last night, when we saw Gruber by the rail outside her room – I realize now that was where the old harridan was standing when Emerelda pushed her. For years Charles kept her alone with her guilt here, probably afraid that he might be incriminated if the truth emerged – perhaps he was more responsible than we imagine. What he failed to realize was that Emerelda had lived so long with her guilt that she'd confused it with the person of Charles himself. Killing him was her only release –'

I broke off to find that Raymond and Tony had gone and were already half way back to the terrace. There was the distant sound of raised voices as members of the film company approached, and whistles shrilled above the exhaust of cars.

The bulky figure of Kanin came through the dunes, flanked by a trio of

assistant producers. Their incredulous faces gaped at the prostrate body. The voices of the sculptures faded for the last time, carrying with them into the depths of the fossil lake the final plaintive cry of Charles Van Stratten.

A year later, after Orpheus Productions had left Lagoon West and the scandal surrounding Charles's death had subsided, we drove out again to the summer-house. It was one of those dull featureless afternoons when the desert is without lustre, the distant hills illuminated by brief flashes of light, and the great summer-house seemed drab and lifeless. The servants and Dr Gruber had left, and the estate was beginning to run down. Sand covered long stretches of the roadway, and the dunes rolled across the open terraces, toppling the sculptures. These were silent now, and the sepulchral emptiness was only broken by the hidden presence of Emerelda Garland.

We found the screens where they had been left, and on an impulse spent the first afternoon digging them out of the sand. Those that had rotted in the sunlight we burned in a pyre on the beach, and perhaps the ascending plumes of purple and carmine smoke first brought our presence to Emerelda. The next afternoon, as we played the screen game, I was conscious of her watching us, and saw a gleam of her blue gown among the shadows.

However, although we played each afternoon throughout the summer, she never joined us, despite the new screens I painted and added to the group. Only on the night I visited Lagoon West alone did she come down, but I could hear the voices of the sculptures calling again and fled at the sight of her white face.

By some acoustic freak, the dead sculptures along the beach had revived themselves, and once again I heard the faint haunted echoes of Charles Van Stratten's last cry before he was killed by the jewelled insects. All over the deserted summer-house the low refrain was taken up by the statues, echoing through the empty galleries and across the moonlit terraces, carried away to the mouths of the sand reefs, the last dark music of the painted night.

1963

TIME OF PASSAGE

Sunlight spilled among the flowers and tombstones, turning the cemetery into a bright garden of sculpture. Like two large gaunt crows, the gravediggers leaned on their spades between the marble angels, their shadows arching across the smooth white flank of one of the recent graves.

The gilt lettering was still fresh and untarnished.

JAMES FALKMAN
1963–1901
'The End is but the Beginning'

Leisurely they began to pare back the crisp turf, then dismantled the headstone and swathed it in a canvas sheet, laying it behind the graves in the next aisle. Biddle, the older of the two, a lean man in a black waistcoat, pointed to the cemetery gates, where the first mourning party approached.

'They're here. Let's get our backs into it.'

The younger man, Biddle's son, watched the small procession winding through the graves. His nostrils scented the sweet broken earth. 'They're always early,' he murmured reflectively. 'It's a strange thing, you never see them come on time.'

A clock tolled from the chapel among the cypresses. Working swiftly, they scooped out the soft earth, piling it into a neat cone at the grave's head. A few minutes later, when the sexton arrived with the principal mourners, the polished teak of the coffin was exposed, and Biddle jumped down on to the lid and scraped away the damp earth clinging to its brass rim.

The ceremony was brief and the twenty mourners, led by Falkman's sister, a tall white-haired woman with a narrow autocratic face, leaning on her husband's arm, soon returned to the chapel. Biddle gestured to his son. They jerked the coffin out of the ground and loaded it on to a cart, strapping it down under the harness. Then they heaped the earth back into the grave and relaid the squares of turf.

As they pushed the cart back to the chapel the sunlight shone brightly among the thinning graves.

Forty-eight hours later the coffin arrived at James Falkman's large

grey-stoned house on the upper slopes of Mortmere Park. The high-walled avenue was almost deserted and few people saw the hearse enter the tree-lined drive. The blinds were drawn over the windows, and huge wreaths rested among the furniture in the hall where Falkman lay motionless in his coffin on a mahogany table. Veiled by the dim light, his square strong-jawed face seemed composed and unblemished, a short lock of hair over his forehead making his expression less severe than his sister's.

A solitary beam of sunlight, finding its way through the dark sycamores which guarded the house, slowly traversed the room as the morning progressed, and shone for a few minutes upon Falkman's open eyes. Even after the beam had moved away a faint glimmer of light still remained in the pupils, like the reflection of a star glimpsed in the bottom of a dark well.

All day, helped by two of her friends, sharp-faced women in long black coats, Falkman's sister moved quietly about the house. Her quick deft hands shook the dust from the velvet curtains in the library, wound up the miniature Louis XV clock on the study desk, and reset the great barometer on the staircase. None of the women spoke to each other, but within a few hours the house was transformed, the dark wood in the hall gleaming as the first callers were admitted.

'Mr and Mrs Montefiore . . .'

'Mr and Mrs Caldwell . . .'

'Miss Evelyn Jermyn and Miss Elizabeth . . .'

'Mr Samuel Banbury . . .'

One by one nodding in acknowledgement as they were announced, the callers trooped into the hall and paused over the coffin, examining Falkman's face with discreet interest, then passed into the dining room where they were presented with a glass of port and a tray of sweetmeats. Most of them were elderly, over-dressed in the warm spring weather, one or two obviously ill at ease in the great oak-panelled house, and all unmistakably revealed the same air of hushed expectancy.

The following morning Falkman was lifted from his coffin and carried upstairs to the bedroom overlooking the drive. The winding sheet was removed from his frail body dressed in a pair of thick woollen pyjamas. He lay quietly between the cold sheets, his grey face sightless and reposed, unaware of his sister crying softly on the high-backed chair beside him. Only when Dr Markham called and put his hand on her shoulder did she contain herself, relieved to have given way to her feelings.

Almost as if this were a signal, Falkman opened his eyes. For a moment they wavered uncertainly, the pupils weak and watery. Then he gazed up at his sister's tear-marked face, his head motionless on the pillow. As she and the doctor leaned forward Falkman smiled fleetingly, his lips parting across his teeth in an expression of immense patience and understanding. Then apparently exhausted he lapsed into a deep sleep.

After securing the blinds over the windows, his sister and the doctor stepped from the room. Below, the doors closed quietly into the drive, and the house became silent. Gradually the sounds of Falkman's breathing grew more steady and filled the bedroom, overlaid by the swaying of the dark trees outside.

So James Falkman made his arrival. For the next week he lay quietly in his bedroom, his strength increasing hourly, and managed to eat his first meals prepared by his sister. She sat in the blackwood chair, her mourning habit exchanged for a grey woollen dress, examining him critically.

'Now James, you'll have to get a better appetite than that. Your poor body is completely wasted.'

Falkman pushed away the tray and let his long slim hands fall across his chest. He smiled amiably at his sister. 'Careful, Betty, or you'll turn me into a milk pudding.'

His sister briskly straightened the eiderdown. 'If you don't like my cooking, James, you can fend for yourself.'

A faint chuckle slipped between Falkman's lips. 'Thank you for telling me, Betty, I fully intend to.'

He lay back, smiling weakly to himself as his sister stalked out with the tray. Teasing her did him almost as much good as the meals she prepared, and he felt the blood reaching down into his cold feet. His face was still grey and flaccid, and he conserved his strength carefully, only his eyes moving as he watched the ravens alighting on the window ledge.

Gradually, as his conversations with his sister became more frequent, Falkman gained sufficient strength to sit up. He began to take a fuller interest in the world around him, watching the people in the avenue through the french windows and disputing his sister's commentary on them.

'There's Sam Banbury again,' she remarked testily as a small leprechaunlike old man hobbled past. 'Off to the Swan as usual. When's he going to get a job, I'd like to know.'

'Be more charitable, Betty. Sam's a very sensible fellow. I'd rather go to the pub than have a job.'

His sister snorted sceptically, her assessment of Falkman's character apparently at variance with this statement. 'You've got one of the finest houses in Mortmere Park,' she told him. 'I think you should be more careful with people like Sam Banbury. He's not in your class, James.'

Falkman smiled patiently at his sister. 'We're all in the same class, or have you been here so long you've forgotten, Betty.'

'We all forget,' she told him soberly. 'You will too, James. It's sad, but we're in this world now, and we must concern ourselves with it. If the church can keep the memory alive for us, so much the better. As you'll find out though, the majority of folk remember nothing. Perhaps it's a good thing.'

She grudgingly admitted the first visitors, fussing about so that Falkman could barely exchange a word with them. In fact, the visits tired him, and

he could do little more than pass a few formal pleasantries. Even when Sam Banbury brought him a pipe and tobacco pouch he had to muster all his energy to thank him and had none left to prevent his sister from making off with them.

Only when the Reverend Matthews called did Falkman manage to summon together his strength, for half an hour spoke earnestly to the parson, who listened with rapt attention, interjecting a few eager questions. When the Reverend left he seemed refreshed and confident, and strode down the stairs with a gay smile at Falkman's sister.

Within three weeks Falkman was out of bed, and managed to hobble downstairs and inspect the house and garden. His sister protested, dogging his slow painful footsteps with sharp reminders of his feebleness, but Falkman ignored her. He found his way to the conservatory, and leaned against one of the ornamental columns, his nervous fingers feeling the leaves of the miniature trees, the scent of flowers flushing his face. Outside, in the grounds, he examined everything around him, as if comparing it with some Elysian paradise in his mind.

He was walking back to the house when he twisted his ankle sharply in the crazy paving. Before he could cry for help he had fallen headlong across the hard stone.

'James Falkman will you never listen?' his sister protested, as she helped him across the terrace. 'I warned you to stay in bed!'

Reaching the lounge, Falkman sat down thankfully in an armchair, reassembling his stunned limbs. 'Quiet, Betty, do you mind,' he admonished his sister when his breath returned. 'I'm still here, and I'm perfectly well.'

He had stated no more than the truth. After the accident he began to recover spectacularly, his progress toward complete health accelerating without a break, as if the tumble had freed him from the lingering fatigue and discomfort of the previous weeks. His step became brisk and lively, his complexion brightened, a soft pink glow filling out his cheeks, and he moved busily around the house.

A month afterwards his sister returned to her own home, acknowledging his ability to look after himself, and her place was taken by the housekeeper. After re-establishing himself in the house, Falkman became increasingly interested in the world outside. He hired a comfortable car and chauffeur, and spent most of the winter afternoons and evenings at his club; soon he found himself the centre of a wide circle of acquaintances. He became the chairman of a number of charitable committees, where his good humour, tolerance and shrewd judgement made him well respected. He now held himself erect, his grey hair sprouting luxuriantly, here and there touched by black flecks, jaw jutting firmly from sun-tanned cheeks.

Every Sunday he attended the morning and evening services at his church, where he owned a private pew, and was somewhat saddened

to see that only the older people formed the congregation. However, he himself found that the picture painted by the liturgy became increasingly detached from his own memories as the latter faded, too soon became a meaningless charade that he could accept only by an act of faith.

A few years later, when he became increasingly restless, he decided to accept the offer of a partnership in a leading firm of stockbrokers.

Many of his acquaintances at the club were also finding jobs, forsaking the placid routines of smoking room and conservatory garden. Harold Caldwell, one of his closest friends, was appointed Professor of History at the university, and Sam Banbury became manager of the Swan Hotel.

The ceremony on Falkman's first day at the stock exchange was dignified and impressive. Three junior men also joining the firm were introduced to the assembled staff by the senior partner, Mr Montefiore, and each presented with a gold watch to symbolize the years he would spend with the firm. Falkman received an embossed silver cigar case and was loudly applauded.

For the next five years Falkman threw himself wholeheartedly into his work, growing more extrovert and aggressive as his appetite for the material pleasures of life increased. He became a keen golfer; then, as the exercise strengthened his physique, played his first games of tennis. An influential member of the business community, his days passed in a pleasant round of conferences and dinner parties. He no longer attended the church, but instead spent his Sundays escorting the more attractive of his lady acquaintances to the race tracks and regattas.

He found it all the more surprising, therefore when a persistent mood of dejection began to haunt him. Although without any apparent source, this deepened slowly, and he found himself reluctant to leave his house in the evenings. He resigned from his committees and no longer visited his club. At the stock exchange he felt permanently distracted, and would stand for hours by the window, staring down at the traffic.

Finally, when his grasp of the business began to slip, Mr Montefiore suggested that he go on indefinite leave.

For a week Falkman listlessly paced around the huge empty house. Sam Banbury frequently called to see him, but Falkman's sense of grief was beyond any help. He drew the blinds over the windows and changed into a black tie and suit, sat blankly in the darkened library.

At last, when his depression had reached its lowest ebb, he went to the cemetery to collect his wife.

After the congregation had dispersed, Falkman paused outside the vestry to tip the gravedigger, Biddle, and compliment him on his young son, a cherubic three-year-old who was playing among the headstones. Then he rode back to Mortmere Park in the car following the hearse, the remainder of the cortege behind him.

'A grand turnout, James,' his sister told him approvingly. 'Twenty cars altogether, not including the private ones.'

Falkman thanked her, his eyes examining his sister with critical detachment. In the fifteen years he had known her she had coarsened perceptibly, her voice roughening and her gestures becoming broader. A distinct social gap had always separated them, a division which Falkman had accepted charitably, but it was now widening markedly. Her husband's business had recently begun to fail, and her thoughts had turned almost exclusively to the subjects of money and social prestige.

As Falkman congratulated himself on his good sense and success, a curious premonition, indistinct but nonetheless disturbing, stirred through his mind.

Like Falkman himself fifteen years earlier, his wife first lay in her coffin in the hall, the heavy wreaths transforming it into a dark olive-green bower. Behind the lowered blinds the air was dim and stifled, and with her rich red hair flaring off her forehead, and her broad cheeks and full lips, his wife seemed to Falkman like some sleeping enchantress in a magical arbour. He gripped the silver foot rail of the coffin and stared at her mindlessly, aware of his sister shepherding the guests to the port and whisky. He traced with his eyes the exquisite dips and hollows around his wife's neck and chin, the white skin sweeping smoothly to her strong shoulders. The next day, when she was carried upstairs, her presence filled the bedroom. All afternoon he sat beside her, waiting patiently for her to wake.

Shortly after five o'clock, in the few minutes of light left before the dusk descended, when the air hung motionlessly under the trees in the garden, a faint echo of life moved across her face. Her eyes cleared and then focused on the ceiling.

Breathlessly, Falkman leaned forward and took one of her cold hands. Far within, the pulse sounded faintly.

'Marion,' he whispered.

Her head inclined slightly, lips parting in a weak smile. For several moments she gazed serenely at her husband.

'Hello, Jamie.'

His wife's arrival completely rejuvenated Falkman. A devoted husband, he was soon completely immersed in their life together. As she recovered from the long illness after her arrival, Falkman entered the prime of his life. His grey hair became sleek and black, his face grew thicker, the chin firmer and stronger. He returned to the stock exchange, taking up his job with renewed interest.

He and Marion made a handsome couple. At intervals they would visit the cemetery and join in the service celebrating the arrival of another of their friends, but these became less frequent. Other parties continually visited the cemetery, thinning the ranks of graves, and large areas had reverted to open lawn as the coffins were withdrawn and the tombstones removed. The firm of undertakers near the cemetery which

was responsible for notifying mourning relatives closed down and was sold. Finally, after the gravedigger, Biddle, recovered his own wife from the last of the graves the cemetery was converted into a children's playground.

The years of their marriage were Falkman's happiest. With each successive summer Marion became slimmer and more youthful, her red hair a brilliant diadem that stood out among the crowds in the street when she came to see him. They would walk home arm in arm, in the summer evening pause among the willows by the river to embrace each other like lovers.

Indeed, their happiness became such a byword among their friends that over two hundred guests attended the church ceremony celebrating the long years of their marriage. As they knelt together at the altar before the priest Marion seemed to Falkman like a demure rose.

This was the last night they were to spend together. Over the years Falkman had become less interested in his work at the stock exchange, and the arrival of older and more serious men had resulted in a series of demotions for him. Many of his friends were facing similar problems. Harold Caldwell had been forced to resign his professorship and was now a junior lecturer, taking postgraduate courses to familiarize himself with the great body of new work that had been done in the previous thirty years. Sam Banbury was a waiter at the Swan Hotel.

Marion went to live with her parents, and the Falkmans' apartment, to which they had moved some years earlier after the house was closed and sold, was let to new tenants. Falkman, whose tastes had become simpler as the years passed, took a room in a hostel for young men, but he and Marion saw each other every evening. He felt increasingly restless, half conscious that his life was moving towards an inescapable focus, and often thought of giving up his job.

Marion remonstrated with him. 'But you'll lose everything you've worked for, Jamie. All those years.'

Falkman shrugged, chewing on a stem of grass as they lay in the park during one of their lunch hours. Marion was now a salesgirl in a department store.

'Perhaps, but I resent being demoted. Even Montefiore is leaving. His grandfather has just been appointed chairman.' He rolled over and put his head in her lap. 'It's so dull in that stuffy office, with all those pious old men. I'm not satisfied with it any longer.'

Marion smiled affectionately at his naïveté and enthusiasm. Falkman was now more handsome than she had ever remembered him, his sun-tanned face almost unlined.

'It's been wonderful together, Marion,' he told her on the eve of their thirtieth anniversary. 'How lucky we've been never to have a child. Do you realize that some people even have three or four? It's absolutely tragic.'

'It comes to us all, though, Jamie,' she reminded him. 'Some people say it's a very beautiful and noble experience, having a child.'

All evening he and Marion wandered round the town together, Falkman's desire for her quickened by her increasing demureness. Since she had gone to live with her parents Marion had become almost too shy to take his hand.

Then he lost her.

Walking through the market in the town centre, they were joined by two of Marion's friends, Elizabeth and Evelyn Jermyn.

'There's Sam Banbury,' Evelyn pointed out as a firework crackled from a stall on the other side of the market. 'Playing the fool as usual.' She and her sister clucked disapprovingly. Tight-mouthed and stern, they wore dark serge coats buttoned to their necks.

Distracted by Sam, Falkman wandered off a few steps, suddenly found that the three girls had walked away. Darting through the crowd, he tried to catch up with them, briefly glimpsed Marion's red hair.

He fought his way through the stalls, almost knocking over a barrow of vegetables and shouted at Sam Banbury:

'Sam! Have you seen Marion?'

Banbury pocketed his crackers and helped him to scan the crowd. For an hour they searched. Finally Sam gave up and went home, leaving Falkman to hang about the cobbled square under the dim lights when the market closed, wandering among the tinsel and litter as the stall holders packed up for home.

'Excuse me, have you seen a girl here? A girl with red hair?'

'Please, she was here this afternoon.'

'A girl . . .'

'. . . called . . .'

Stunned, he realized that he had forgotten her name.

Shortly afterwards, Falkman gave up his job and went to live with his parents. Their small red-brick house was on the opposite side of the town; between the crowded chimney pots he could sometimes see the distant slopes of Mortmere Park. His life now began a less carefree phase, as most of his energy went into helping his mother and looking after his sister Betty. By comparison with his own house his parents' home was bleak and uncomfortable, altogether alien to everything Falkman had previously known. Although kind and respectable people, his parents' lives were circumscribed by their lack of success or education. They had no interest in music or the theatre, and Falkman found his mind beginning to dull and coarsen.

His father was openly critical of him for leaving his job, but the hostility between them gradually subsided as he more and more began to dominate Falkman, restricting his freedom and reducing his pocket money, even warning him not to play with certain of his friends. In fact, going to live with his parents had taken Falkman into an entirely new world.

By the time he began to go to school Falkman had completely forgotten his past life, his memories of Marion and the great house where they had lived surrounded by servants altogether obliterated.

During his first term at school he was in a class with the older boys, whom the teachers treated as equals, but like his parents they began to extend their influence over him as the years passed. At times Falkman rebelled against this attempt to suppress his own personality, but at last they entirely dominated him, controlling his activities and moulding his thoughts and speech. The whole process of education, he dimly realized, was designed to prepare him for the strange twilight world of his earliest childhood. It deliberately eliminated every trace of sophistication, breaking down, with its constant repetitions and brain-splitting exercises, all his knowledge of language and mathematics, substituting for them a collection of meaningless rhymes, and chants, and out of this constructing an artificial world of total infantilism.

At last, when the process of education had reduced him almost to the stage of an inarticulate infant, his parents intervened by removing him from the school, and the final years of his life were spent at home.

'Mama, can I sleep with you?'

Mrs Falkman looked down at the serious-faced little boy who leaned his head on her pillow. Affectionately she pinched his square jaw and then touched her husband's shoulder as he stirred. Despite the years between father and son, their two bodies were almost identical, with the same broad shoulders and broad heads, the same thick hair.

'Not today, Jamie, but soon perhaps, one day.'

The child watched his mother with wide eyes, wondering why she should be crying to herself, guessing that perhaps he had touched upon one of the taboos that had exercised such a potent fascination for all the boys at school, the mystery of their ultimate destination that remained carefully shrouded by their parents and which they themselves were no longer able to grasp.

By now he was beginning to experience the first difficulties in both walking and feeding himself. He tottered about clumsily, his small piping voice tripping over his tongue. Steadily his vocabulary diminished until he knew only his mother's name. When he could no longer stand upright she would carry him in her arms, feeding him like an elderly invalid. His mind clouded, a few constants of warmth and hunger drifting through it hazily. As long as he could, he clung to his mother.

Shortly afterward, Falkman and his mother visited the lying-in hospital for several weeks. On her return Mrs Falkman remained in bed for a few days, but gradually she began to move about more freely, slowly shedding the additional weight accumulated during her confinement.

Some nine months after she returned from the hospital, a period during

which she and her husband thought continually of their son, the tragedy of his approaching death, a symbol of their own imminent separation, bringing them closer together, they went away on their honeymoon.

1964

PRISONER OF THE CORAL DEEP

I found the shell at low tide, lying in a rock-pool near the cave, its huge mother-of-pearl spiral shining through the clear water like a Fabergé gem. During the storm I had taken shelter in the mouth of the cave, watching the grey waves hurl themselves towards me like exhausted saurians, and the shell lay at my feet almost as a token of the sea's regret.

The storm was still rumbling along the cliffs in the distance, and I was wary of leaving the cave. All morning I had been walking along this deserted stretch of the Dorset coast. I had entered a series of enclosed bays from which there were no pathways to the cliffs above. Quarried by the sea, the limestone bluffs were disturbed by continuous rock-slides, and the beaches were littered by huge slabs of pockmarked stone. Almost certainly there would be further falls after the storm. I stepped cautiously from my shelter, peering up at the high cliffs. Even the wheeling gulls crying to each other seemed reluctant to alight on their crumbling cornices.

Below me, the seashell lay in its pool, apparently magnified by the lens of water. It was fully twelve inches long, the corrugated shell radiating into five huge spurs. A fossil gastropod, which had once basked in the warm Cambrian seas five hundred million years earlier, it had presumably been torn loose by the waves from one of the limestone boulders.

Impressed by its size, I decided to take it home to my wife as a memento of my holiday – needing a complete change of scene after an unprecedentedly busy term at school, I had been packed off to the coast for a week. I stepped into the pool and lifted the shell from the water, and then turned to retrace my steps along the coast.

To my surprise, I was being watched by a solitary figure on the limestone ledge twenty yards behind me, a tall raven-haired woman in a sea-blue gown that reached to her feet. She stood motionlessly among the rock-pools, like a Pre-Raphaelite vision of the dark-eyed Madonna of some primitive fisher community, looking down at me with meditative eyes veiled by the drifting spray. Her dark hair, parted in the centre of her low forehead, fell like a shawl to her shoulders and enclosed her calm but somewhat melancholy face.

I stared at her soundlessly, and then made a tentative gesture with the seashell. The ragged cliffs and the steep sea and sky seemed to enclose us with a sense of absolute remoteness, as if the rocky beach and our chance encounter had been transported to the bleak shores of Tierra del Fuego on

the far tip of the world's end. Against the damp cliffs her blue robe glowed with an almost spectral vibrancy, matched only by the brilliant pearl of the shell in my hands. I assumed that she lived in an isolated house somewhere above the cliffs – the storm had ended only ten minutes earlier, and there appeared to be no other shelter – and that a hidden pathway ran down among the fissures in the limestone.

I climbed up to the ledge and walked across to her. I had gone on holiday specifically to escape from other people, but after the storm and my walk along the abandoned coast, I was glad to talk to someone. Although she showed no response to my smile, the woman's dark eyes watched me without hostility, as if she were waiting for me to approach her.

At our feet the sea hissed, the waves running like serpents between the rocks.

'The storm certainly came up suddenly,' I commented. 'I managed to shelter in the cave.' I pointed to the cliff top two hundred feet above us. 'You must have a magnificent view of the sea. Do you live up there?'

Her white skin was like ancient pearl. 'I live by the sea,' she said. Her voice had a curiously deep timbre, as if heard under water. She was at least six inches taller than myself, although I am by no means a short man. 'You have a beautiful shell,' she remarked.

I weighed it in one hand. 'Impressive, isn't it? A fossil snail – far older than this limestone, you know. I'll probably give it to my wife, though it should go to the Natural History Museum.'

'Why not leave it on the beach where it belongs?' she said. 'The sea is its home.'

'Not this sea,' I rejoined. 'The Cambrian oceans where this snail swam vanished millions of years ago.' I detached a thread of fucus clinging to one of the spurs and let it fall away on the air. 'I'm not sure why, but fossils fascinate me – they're like time capsules; if only one could unwind this spiral it would probably play back to us a picture of all the landscapes it's ever seen – the great oceans of the Carboniferous, the warm shallow seas of the Trias . . .'

'Would you like to go back to them?' There was a note of curiosity in her voice, as if my comments had intrigued her. 'Would you prefer them to this time?'

'Hardly. I suppose it's just the nostalgia of one's unconscious memory. Perhaps you understand what I mean – the sea is like memory. However lost or forgotten, everything in its exists for ever . . .' Her lips moved in what seemed to be the beginnings of a smile. 'Or does the idea seem strange?'

'Not at all.'

She watched me pensively. Her robe was woven from some bright thread of blue silver, almost like the hard brilliant scales of pelagic fish.

Her eyes turned to the sea. The tide had begun to come in, and already the pool where I found the shell was covered by the water. The first waves were breaking into the mouth of the cave, and the ledge we stood on

would soon be surrounded. I glanced over my shoulder for any signs of the cliff path.

'It's getting stormy again,' I said. 'The Atlantic is rather bad-tempered and unpredictable – as you'd expect from an ancient sea. Once it was part of a great ocean called –'

'Poseidon.'

I turned to look at her.

'You knew?'

'Of course.' She regarded me tolerantly. 'You're a school-master. So this is what you teach your pupils, to remember the sea and go back to the past?'

I laughed at myself, amused at being caught out by her. 'I'm sorry. One of the teacher's occupational hazards is that he can never resist a chance to pass on knowledge.'

'Memory and the sea?' She shook her head sagely. 'You deal in magic, not knowledge. Tell me about your shell.'

The water lifted towards us among the rocks. To my left a giant's causeway of toppled pillars led to the safety of the upper beach. I debated whether to leave; the climb up the cliff face, even if the path were well cut, would take at least half an hour, especially if I had to assist my companion. Apparently indifferent to the sea, she watched the waves writhing at our feet, like reptiles in a pit. Around us the great cliffs seemed to sink downward into the water.

'Perhaps I should let the shell speak for itself,' I demurred. My wife was less tolerant of my tendency to bore. I lifted the shell to my ear and listened to the whispering trumpet.

The helix reflected the swishing of the waves, the contours of the shell in some way magnifying the sounds, so that they echoed with the darker murmur of deep water. Around me the breakers fell among the rocks with a rhythmic roar and sigh, but from the shell poured an extraordinary confusion of sounds, and I seemed to be listening not merely to the waves breaking on the shore below me but to an immense ocean lapping all the beaches of the world. I could hear the roar and whistle of giant rollers, shingle singing in the undertow, storms and typhonic winds boiling the sea into a maelstrom. Then abruptly the scene seemed to shift, and I heard the calm measures of a different sea, a steaming shallow lagoon through whose surface vast ferns protruded, where half-submerged leviathans lay like sandbanks under a benign sun . . .

My companion was watching me, her high face lifted to catch the leaping spray. 'Did you hear the sea?'

I pressed the shell to my ear. Again I heard the sounds of ancient water, this time of an immense storm in progress, a titanic struggle against the collapsing isthmuses of a sinking continent. I could hear the growling of gigantic saurians, the cries of reptile birds diving from high cliffs on to their prey below, their ungainly wings unshackling as they fell.

Astonished, I squeezed the shell in my hands, feeling the hard calcareous spines as if they might spring open the shell's secret.

The woman still watched me. By some freak of the fading light she appeared to have grown in height, her shoulders almost overtopping my head.

'I . . . can't hear anything,' I said uncertainly.

'Listen to it!' she admonished me. 'That shell has heard the seas of all time, every wave has left its echo there.'

The first foam splashed across my feet, staining the dried straps of my sandals. A narrowing causeway of rocks still led back to the beach. The cave had vanished, its mouth spewing bubbles as the waves briefly receded.

I pointed to the cliff. 'Is there a path? A way down to the sea?'

'To the sea? Of course!' The wind lifted the train of her robe, and I saw her bare feet, seaweed wreathed around her toes. 'Now listen to the shell. The sea is waking for you.'

I raised the shell with both hands. This time I closed my eyes, and as the sounds of the ancient wind and water echoed in my ears I saw a sudden image of the lonely bay millions of years earlier. High cliffs of white shale reached to the sky, and huge reptiles sidled along the coarse beaches, baying at the grotesque armoured fish which lunged at them from the shallows. Volcanic cones ringed the horizon, their red vents staining the sky.

'What can you hear?' my companion asked me insistently, evidently disappointed. 'The sea and the wind?'

'I hear nothing,' I said thickly. 'Only a whispering.'

The noise erupted from the shell's mouth, the harsh bellows of the saurians competing with the sea. Suddenly I heard another sound above this babel, a thin cry that seemed to come from the cave in which I had sheltered. Searching the image in my mind, I could see the cave mouth set into the cliff above the heads of the jostling reptiles.

'Wait!' I waved the woman away, ignoring the waves that sluiced across my feet. As the sea receded, I pressed my ear to the conch, and heard again the faint human cry, a stricken plea for rescue –

'Can you hear the sea now?' The woman reached to take the shell from me.

I held to it tightly and shouted above the waves. 'Not *this* sea! My God, I heard a man crying!'

For a moment she hesitated, uncertain what to make of this unexpected remark. 'A man? Who, tell me! Give it to me! It was only a drowned sailor!'

Again I snatched the shell away from her. Listening, I could still hear the voice calling, now and then lost in the roar of the reptiles. A sailor, yes, but a mariner from the distant future, marooned millions of years ago in this cave on the edge of a Triassic sea, guarded by this strange naiad of the deep who even now guided me to the waves.

She had moved to the edge of the rock, the strands of her hair shimmering across her face in the wind. With a hand she beckoned me towards her.

For the last time I lifted the shell to my ear, and for the last time heard that faint plaintive cry, lost on the reeling air.

'H-h-e-e-lp!'

Closing my eyes, I let the image of the ancient shore fill my mind, for a fleeting instant saw a small white face watching from the cave mouth. Whoever he was, had he despaired of returning to his own age, selected a beautiful shell and cast it into the sea below, hoping that one day someone would hear his voice and return to save him?

'Come! It's time to leave!' Although she was a dozen feet from me, her outstretched hands seemed almost to touch mine. The water raced around her robe, swirling it into strange liquid patterns. Her face watched me like that of some monstrous fish.

'No!'

With sudden fury I stepped away from her, then turned and hurled the great shell far out into the deep water beyond her reach. As it vanished into the steep waves I heard a flurry of heavy robes, almost like the beating of leathery wings.

The woman had gone. Quickly I leapt on to the nearest rock of the causeway, slipped into the shallows between two waves and then clambered to safety. Only when I had reached the shelter of the cliffs did I look back.

On the ledge where she had stood a large lizard watched me with empty eyes.

1964

THE LOST LEONARDO

The disappearance – or, to put it less euphemistically – the theft of the *Crucifixion* by Leonardo da Vinci from the Museum of the Louvre in Paris, discovered on the morning of April 19, 1965, caused a scandal of unprecedented proportions. A decade of major art thefts, such as those of Goya's *Duke of Wellington* from the National Gallery, London, and collections of impressionists from the homes of millionaires in the South of France and California, as well as the obviously inflated prices paid in the auction rooms of Bond Street and the Rue de Rivoli, might have been expected to accustom the general public to the loss of yet another over-publicized masterpiece, but in fact the news of its disappearance was received by the world with genuine consternation and outrage. From all over the globe thousands of telegrams poured in daily at the Quai d'Orsay and the Louvre, the French consulates at Bogota and Guatemala City were stoned, and the panache and finesse of press attachés at every embassy from Buenos Aires to Bangkok were strained to their not inconsiderable limits.

I myself reached Paris over twenty-four hours after what was being called 'the great Leonardo scandal' had taken place, and the atmosphere of bewilderment and indignation was palpable. All the way from Orly Airport the newspaper headlines on the kiosks blazoned the same story.

As the *Continental Daily Mail* put it succinctly:

LEONARDO'S CRUCIFIXION STOLEN
£5 Million Masterpiece Vanishes from Louvre

Official Paris, by all accounts, was in uproar. The hapless director of the Louvre had been recalled from a Unesco conference in Brasilia and was now on the carpet at the Elysée Palace, reporting personally to the President, the Deuxieme Bureau had been alerted, and at least three ministers without portfolio had been appointed, their political futures staked to the recovery of the painting. As the President himself had remarked at his press conference the previous afternoon, the theft of a Leonardo was an affair not only for France, but for the entire world, and in a passionate plea he enjoined everyone to help effect its speedy return (despite the emotionally charged atmosphere, cynical observers noticed that this was the first crisis of his career

when the Great Man did not conclude his peroration with 'Vive La France').

My own feelings, despite my professional involvement with the fine arts – I was, and am, a director of Northeby's, the world-famous Bond Street auctioneers – by and large coincided with those of the general public. As the taxi passed the Tuileries Gardens I looked out at the crude half-tone illustrations of da Vinci's effulgent masterpiece reproduced in the newspapers, recalling the immense splendour of the painting, with its unparalleled composition and handling of chiaroscuro, its unsurpassed technique, which together had launched the High Renaissance and provided a beacon for the sculptors, painters and architects of the Baroque.

Despite the two million reproductions of the painting sold each year, not to mention the countless pastiches and inferior imitations, the subject matter of the painting still retained its majestic power. Completed two years after da Vinci's *Virgin and St Anne*, also in the Louvre, it was not only one of the few Leonardos to have survived intact the thousand eager hands of the retouchers of four centuries, but was the only painting by the master, apart from the dissolving and barely visible *Last Supper*, in which he handled a composition with a large landscape and a huge gallery of supporting figures.

It was this latter factor, perhaps, which gave the painting its terrifying, hallucinatory power. The enigmatic, almost ambivalent expression on the face of the dying Christ, the hooded serpentine eyes of the Madonna and Magdalene, these characteristic signatures of Leonardo became more than mere mannerisms when set against the huge spiral concourse of attendant figures that seemed to swirl up into the distant sky across the Place of Bones, transforming the whole image of the crucifixion into an apocalyptic vision of the resurrection and judgment of mankind. From this single canvas had come the great frescoes of Michelangelo and Raphael in the Sistine Chapel, the entire schools of Tintoretto and Veronese. That someone should have the audacity to steal it was a tragic comment on mankind's respect for its greatest monuments.

And yet, I wondered as we arrived at the offices of Galleries Normande et Cie in the Madeleine, had the painting really been stolen at all? Its size, some 15 feet by 18 feet, and weight – it had been transferred from the original canvas to an oak panel – precluded a single fanatic or psychopath, and no gang of professional art thieves would waste their time stealing a painting for which there would be no market. Could it be, perhaps, that the French government was hoping to distract attention from some other impending event, though nothing less than the re-introduction of the monarchy and the coronation of the Bourbon Pretender in Notre Dame would have required such an elaborate smoke-screen.

At the first opportunity I raised my doubts with Georg de Stael, the director of Galleries Normande with whom I was staying during my visit. Ostensibly I had come to Paris to attend a conference that afternoon of art dealers and gallery directors who had also suffered from thefts of major

works of art, but to any outsider our mood of elation and high spirits would have suggested some other motive. This, of course, would have been correct. Whenever a large stone is cast into the turbid waters of international art, people such as myself and Georg de Stael immediately take up our positions on the bank, watching for any unusual ripple or malodorous bubble. Without doubt the theft of the Leonardo would reveal a good deal more than the identity of some crackpot cat burglar. All the darker fish would now be swimming frantically for cover, and a salutary blow had been struck at the official establishment of senior museum curators and directors.

Such feelings of revenge obviously animated Georg as he moved with dapper, light-footed ease around his desk to greet me. His blue silk summer suit, well in advance of the season, glittered like his smooth brilliantined hair, his svelte rapacious features breaking into a smile of roguish charm.

'My dear Charles, I assure you, categorically, the confounded picture has actually gone –' Georg shot out three inches of elegant chalk-blue cuff and snapped his hands together '– puff! For once everyone is speaking the truth. What is even more remarkable, the painting was genuine.'

'I don't know whether I'm glad to hear that or not,' I admitted. 'But it's certainly more than you can say for most of the Louvre – and the National Gallery.'

'Agreed.' Georg straddled his desk, his patent leather shoes twinkling in the light. 'I had hoped that this catastrophe might induce the authorities to make a clean breast of some of their so-called treasures, in an attempt, as it were to dispel some of the magic surrounding the Leonardo. But they are in a complete fuddle.'

For a moment we both contemplated what such a sequence of admissions would do to the art markets of the world – the prices of anything even remotely genuine would soar – as well as to the popular image of Renaissance painting as something sacrosanct and unparalleled. However, this was not to gainsay the genius of the stolen Leonardo.

'Tell me, Georg,' I asked. 'Who stole it?' I assumed he knew.

For the first time in many years Georg seemed at a loss for an answer. He shrugged helplessly. 'My dear Charles, I just do not know. It's a complete mystery. Everyone is as baffled as you are.'

'In that case it must be an inside job.'

'Definitely not. The present crowd at the Louvre are beyond reproach.' He tapped the telephone. 'This morning I was speaking to some of our more dubious contacts – Antweiler in Messina and Kolenskya in Beirut – and they are both mystified. In fact they're convinced that either the whole thing is a put-up affair by the present regime, or else the Kremlin itself is involved.'

'The Kremlin?' I echoed incredulously. At the invocation of this name the atmosphere heightened, and for the next half an hour we spoke in whispers.

* * *

The conference that afternoon, at the Palais de Chaillot, offered no further clues. Chief Detective-Inspector Carnot, a massive gloomy man in a faded blue suit, took the chair, flanked by other agents of the Deuxieme Bureau. All of them looked tired and dispirited; by now they were having to check up on some dozen false alarms each hour. Behind them, like a hostile jury, sat a sober-faced group of investigators from Lloyds of London and Morgan Guaranty Trust of New York. By contrast, the two hundred dealers and agents sitting on the gilt chairs below the platform presented an animated scene, chattering away in a dozen languages and flying a score of speculative kites.

After a brief resumé, delivered in a voice of sepulchral resignation, Inspector Carnot introduced a burly Dutchman next to him, Superintendent Jurgens of the Interpol bureau at The Hague, and then called on M. Auguste Pecard, assistant director of the Louvre, for a detailed description of the theft. This merely confirmed that the security arrangements at the Louvre were first-class and that it was absolutely impossible for the painting to have been stolen. I could see that Pecard was still not entirely convinced that it had gone.

'. . . the pressure panels in the floor surrounding the painting have not been disturbed, nor have the two infra-red beams across its face been broken. Gentlemen, I assure you it is impossible to remove the painting without first dismantling the bronze frame. This alone weighs eight hundred pounds and is bolted into the wall behind it. But the electric alarm circuit which flows through the bolts was not interrupted . . .'

I was looking up at the two life-size photographs of the front and reverse faces of the painting fastened to the screens behind the dais. The latter showed the back of the oak panel with its six aluminium ribs, contact points for the circuit and a mass of chalked graffiti enscribed over the years by the museum laboratories. The photographs had been taken the last time the picture was removed for cleaning, and after a brief bout of questioning it transpired that this had been completed only two days before the theft.

At this news the atmosphere of the conference changed. The hundred private conversations ceased, coloured silk handkerchiefs were returned to their breast pockets.

I nudged Georg de Stael. 'So that explains it.' Obviously the painting had disappeared during its period in the laboratory, where the security arrangements would be less than fool-proof. 'It was not stolen from the *gallery* at all.'

The hubbub around us had re-started. Two hundred noses once again were lifted to scent the trail. So the painting *had* been stolen, and was somewhere at large in the world. The rewards to the discoverer, if not the Legion of Honour or a Knighthood, then at least complete freedom from all income tax and foreign exchange investigations, hovered like a spectre before us.

On the way back, however, Georg stared sombrely through the window of the taxi.

'The painting *was* stolen from the gallery,' he said to me pensively. 'I saw it there myself just twelve hours before it vanished.' He took my arm and held it tightly. 'We'll find it, Charles, for the glory of Northeby's and the Galleries Normande. But, my God, the man who stole it was a thief out of this world!'

So began the quest for the missing Leonardo. I returned to London the next morning, but Georg and I were in regular contact by telephone. Initially, like all the others on its trail, we merely listened, ears to the ground for an unfamiliar foot-fall. In the crowded auction rooms and galleries we waited for the indiscreet word, for the give-away clue. Business, of course, was buoyant; every museum and private owner with a third-rate Rubens or Raphael had now moved up a rung. With luck the renewed market activity would uncover some distant accomplice of the thief, or a previous substitute for the Leonardo – perhaps a pastiche *Mona Lisa* by one of Verrocchio's pupils – would be jettisoned by the thief and appear on one of the shadier markets. If the hunt for the vanished painting was conducted as loudly as ever in the outside world, within the trade all was quiet and watchful.

In fact, too quiet. By rights something should have materialized, some faint clue should have appeared on the fine filters of the galleries and auction rooms. But nothing was heard. As the wave of activity launched by the displaced Leonardo rolled past and business resumed its former tempo, inevitably the painting became just another on the list of lost masterpieces.

Only Georg de Stael seemed able to maintain his interest in the search. Now and then he would put through a call to London, requesting some obscure piece of information about an anonymous buyer of a Titian or Rembrandt in the late 18th century, or the history of some damaged copy by a pupil of Rubens or Raphael. He seemed particularly interested in works known to have been damaged and subsequently restored, information with which many private owners are naturally jealous of parting.

Consequently, when he called to see me in London some four months after the disappearance of the Leonardo, it was not in a purely jocular sense that I asked: 'Well, Georg, do you know who stole it yet?'

Unclipping a large briefcase, Georg smiled at me darkly. 'Would it surprise you if I said "yes"? As a matter of fact, I don't know, but I have an idea, a hypothesis, shall we say. I thought you might be interested to hear it.'

'Of course, Georg,' I said, adding reprovingly: 'So this is what you've been up to.'

He raised a thin forefinger to silence me. Below the veneer of easy charm I noticed a new mood of seriousness, a cutting of conversational corners.

'First, Charles, before you laugh me out of your office, let's say that I consider my theory completely fantastic and implausible, and yet –' he shrugged deprecatingly '– it seems to be the only one possible. To prove it I need your help.'

'Given before asked. But what is this theory? I can't wait to hear.'

He hesitated, apparently uncertain whether to expose his idea, and then began to empty the briefcase, taking out a series of looseleaf files which he placed in a row facing him along the desk. These contained what appeared to be photographic reproductions of a number of paintings, areas within them marked with white ink. Several of the photographs were enlargements of details, all of a high-faced, goatee-bearded man in mediaeval costume.

Georg inverted six of the larger plates so that I could see them. 'You recognize these, of course?'

I nodded. With the exception of one, Rubens' *Pieta* in the Hermitage Museum at Leningrad, I had seen the originals of them all within the previous five years. The others were the missing Leonardo *Crucifixion*, the *Crucifixions* by Veronese, Goya and Holbein, and that by Poussin, entitled *The Place of Golgotha*. All were in public museums – the Louvre, San Stefano in Venice, the Prado and the Ryksmuseum, Amsterdam – and all were familiar, well-authenticated masterworks, centrepieces, apart from the Poussin, of major national collections. 'It's reassuring to see them. I trust they're all in good hands. Or are they next on the mysterious thief's shopping list?'

Georg shook his head. 'No, I don't think he's very interested in these. Though he keeps a watching brief over them.' Again I noticed the marked change in Georg's manner, the reflective private humour. 'Do you notice anything else?'

I compared the photographs again. 'They're all crucifixions. Authentic, except perhaps in minor details. They were all easel paintings.' I shrugged.

'They all, at some time, have been stolen.' Georg moved quickly from right to left. 'The Poussin from the Chateau Loire collection in 1822, the Goya in 1806 from the Monte Cassino monastery, by Napoleon, the Veronese from the Prado in 1891, the Leonardo four months ago as we know, and the Holbein in 1943, looted for the Herman Goering collection.'

'Interesting,' I commented. 'But few masterworks haven't been stolen at some time. I hope this isn't a key point in your theory.'

'No, but in conjunction with another factor it gains in significance. Now.' He handed the Leonardo reproduction to me. 'Anything unusual there?' When I shook my head at the familiar image he picked up another photograph of the missing painting. 'What about that one?'

The photographs had been taken from slightly different perspectives, but otherwise seemed identical. 'They are both of the original *Crucifixion*,' Georg explained, 'taken in the Louvre within a month of its disappearance.'

'I give up,' I admitted. 'They seem the same. No – wait a minute!' I pulled the table light nearer and bent over the plates, as Georg nodded. 'They're slightly different. What is going on?'

Quickly, figure by figure, I compared the photographs, within a few moments seized on the minute disparity. In almost every particular the pictures were identical, but one figure out of the score or more on the crowded field had been altered. On the left, where the procession wound its way up the hillside towards the three crosses, the face of one of the bystanders had been completely repainted. Although, in the centre of the painting, the Christ hung from the cross some hours after the crucifixion, by a sort of spatio-temporal perspective – a common device in all Renaissance painting for overcoming the static nature of the single canvas – the receding procession carried the action backwards through time, so that one followed the invisible presence of the Christ on his painful last ascent of Golgotha.

The figure whose face had been repainted formed part of the crowd on the lower slopes. A tall powerfully built man in a black robe, he had obviously been the subject of special care by Leonardo, who had invested him with the magnificent physique and serpentine grace usually reserved for his depiction of angels. Looking at the photograph in my left hand, the original unretouched version, I realized that Leonardo had indeed intended the figure to represent an angel of death, or rather, one of those agents of the unconscious, terrifying in their enigmatic calm, in their brooding ambivalence, who seem to preside in his paintings over all man's deepest fears and longings, like the grey-faced statues that stare down from the midnight cornices of the necropolis at Pompeii.

All this, so typical of Leonardo and his curious vision, seemed to be summed up by the face of this tall angelic figure. Turned almost in profile over the left shoulder, the face looked up towards the cross, a faint flicker of pity investing the grey saturnine features. A high forehead, slightly flared at the temples, rose above the handsome semitic nose and mouth. A trace of a smile, of compassionate resignation and understanding, hung about the lips, providing a solitary source of light which illuminated the remainder of the face partly obscured by the shadows of the thundering sky.

In the photograph on my right, however, all this had been altered completely. The whole character of this angelic figure had been replaced by a new conception. The superficial likeness remained, but the face had lost its expression of tragic compassion. The later artist had reversed its posture altogether, and the head was turned away from the cross and over the right shoulder towards the earthly city of Jerusalem whose spectral towers rose like a city of Miltonic hell in the blue dusk. While the other bystanders followed the ascending Christ as if helpless to assist him, the expression on the face of the black-robed figure was arrogant and critical, the tension of the averted neck muscles indicating that

he had swung his head away almost in disgust from the spectacle before him.

'What is this?' I asked, pointing to the latter photograph. 'Some lost pupil's copy? I can't see why –'

Georg leaned forward and tapped the print. '*That* is the original Leonardo. Don't you understand, Charles? The version on your left which you were admiring for so many minutes was superimposed by some unknown retoucher, only a few years after da Vinci's death.' He smiled at my scepticism. 'Believe me, it's true. The figure concerned is only a minor part of the composition, no one had seriously examined it before, as the rest of the painting is without doubt original. These additions were discovered five months ago shortly after the painting was removed for cleaning. The infra-red examination revealed the completely intact profile below.'

He passed two more photographs to me, both large-scale details of the head, in which the contrasts of characterization were even more obvious. 'As you can see from the brush-work in the shading, the retouching was done by a right-handed artist, whereas we know, of course, that da Vinci was left-handed.'

'Well . . .' I shrugged. 'It seems strange. But if what you say is correct, why on earth was such a small detail altered? The whole conception of the character is different.'

'An interesting question,' Georg said ambiguously. 'Incidentally, the figure is that of Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew.' He pointed to the man's feet. 'He's always conventionally represented by the crossed sandal-straps of the Essene Sect, to which Jesus himself may have belonged.'

I picked up the photographs again. 'The Wandering Jew,' I repeated softly. 'How curious. The man who taunted Christ to move faster and was condemned to rove the surface of the earth until the Second Coming. It's almost as if the retoucher were an apologist for him, superimposing this expression of tragic pity over Leonardo's representation. There's an idea for you, Georg. You know how courtiers and wealthy merchants who gathered at painters' studios were informally incorporated into their paintings – perhaps Ahasuerus would move around, posing as himself, driven by a sort of guilt compulsion, then later steal the paintings and revise them. Now there *is* a theory.'

I looked across at Georg, waiting for him to reply. He was nodding slowly, eyes watching mine in unspoken agreement, all trace of humour absent. 'Georg!' I exclaimed. 'Are you serious? Do you mean –'

He interrupted me gently but forcefully. 'Charles, just give me a few more minutes to explain. I warned you that my theory was fantastic.' Before I could protest he passed me another photograph. 'The Veronese *Crucifixion*. See anyone you recognize? On the bottom left.'

I raised the photograph to the light. 'You're right. The late Venetian treatment is different, far more pagan, but it's quite obvious. You know, Georg, it's a remarkable likeness.'

'Agreed. But it's not only the likeness. Look at the pose and characterization.'

Identified again by his black robes and crossed sandal-straps, the figure of Ahasuerus stood among the throng on the crowded canvas. The unusual feature was not so much that the pose was again that of the retouched Leonardo, with Ahasuerus now looking with an expression of deep compassion at the dying Christ – an altogether meaningless interpretation – but the remarkable likeness between the two faces, almost as if they had been painted from the same model. The beard was perhaps a little fuller, in the Venetian manner, but the planes of the face, the flaring of the temples, the handsome coarseness of the mouth and jaw, the wise resignation in the eyes, that of some well-travelled physician witnessing an act of barbaric beauty and power, all these were exactly echoed from the Leonardo.

I gestured helplessly. 'It's an amazing coincidence.'

Georg nodded. 'Another is that this painting, like the Leonardo, was stolen shortly after being extensively cleaned. When it was recovered in Florence two years later it was slightly damaged, and no further attempts were made to restore the painting.' Georg paused. 'Do you see my point, Charles?'

'More or less. I take it you suspect that if the Veronese were now cleaned a rather different version of Ahasuerus would be found. Veronese's original depiction.'

'Exactly. After all, the present treatment makes no sense. If you're still sceptical, look at these others.'

Standing up, we began to go through the remainder of the photographs. In each of the others, the Poussin, Holbein, Goya and Rubens, the same figure was to be found, the same dark saturnine face regarding the cross with an expression of compassionate understanding. In view of the very different styles of the artists, the degree of similarity was remarkable. In each, as well, the pose was meaningless, the characterization completely at odds with the legendary role of Ahasuerus.

By now the intensity of Georg's conviction was communicating itself to me physically. He drummed the desk with the palm of one hand. 'In each case, Charles, all six paintings were stolen shortly after they had been cleaned – even the Holbein was looted from the Herman Goering collection by some renegade SS after being repaired by concentration camp inmates. As you yourself said, it's almost as if the thief was unwilling for the world to see the true image of Ahasuerus's character exposed and deliberately painted in these apologies.'

'But Georg, you're making a large assumption there. Can you prove that in each case, apart from the Leonardo, there is an original version below the present one?'

'Not yet. Naturally galleries are reluctant to give anyone the opportunity to show that their works are not entirely genuine. I know all this is still hypothesis, but what other explanation can you find?'

Shaking my head, I went over to the window, letting the noise and

movement of Bond Street cut through Georg's heady speculations. 'Are you seriously suggesting, Georg, that the black-robed figure of Ahasuerus is promenading somewhere on those pavements below us now, and that all through the centuries he's been stealing and retouching paintings that represent him spurning Jesus? The idea's ludicrous!'

'No more ludicrous than the theft of the painting. Everyone agrees it could not have been stolen by anyone bounded by the laws of the physical universe.'

For a moment we stared at each other across the desk. 'All right,' I temporized, not wishing to offend him. The intensity of his idée fixe had alarmed me. 'But isn't our best plan simply to sit back and wait for the Leonardo to turn up again?'

'Not necessarily. Most of the stolen paintings remained lost for ten or twenty years. Perhaps the effort of stepping outside the bounds of space and time exhausts him, or perhaps the sight of the original paintings terrifies him so –' He broke off as I began to come forward towards him. 'Look, Charles, it *is* fantastic, but there's a slim chance it may be true. This is where I need your help. It's obvious this man must be a great patron of the arts, drawn by an irresistible compulsion, by unassuageable feelings of guilt, towards those artists painting crucifixions. We must begin to watch the sale rooms and galleries. That face, those black eyes and that haunted profile – sooner or later we'll see him, searching for another *Crucifixion* or *Pieta*. Cast your mind back, do you recognize that face?'

I looked down at the carpet, the image of the dark-eyed wanderer before me. *Go quicker*, he had taunted Jesus as he passed bearing the cross towards Golgotha, and Jesus had replied: *I go, but thou shalt wait until I return.* I was about to say 'no', but something restrained me, some reflex pause of recognition stirred through my mind. That handsome Levantine profile, in a different costume, of course, a smart dark-striped lounge suit, gold-topped cane and spats, bidding through an agent . . .

'You *have* seen him?' Georg came over to me. 'Charles, I think I have too.'

I gestured him away. 'I'm not sure, Georg, but . . . I almost wonder.' Curiously it was the retouched portrait of Ahasuerus, rather than Leonardo's original, which seemed more real, closer to the face I felt sure I had actually seen. Suddenly I pivoted on my heel. 'Confound it, Georg, do you realize that if this incredible idea of yours is true this man must have spoken to Leonardo? To Michelangelo, and Titian and Rembrandt?'

Georg nodded. 'And someone else too,' he added pensively.

For the next month, after Georg's return to Paris, I spent less time in my office and more in the sale rooms, watching for that familiar profile which something convinced me I had seen before. But for this undeniable conviction I would have dismissed Georg's hypothesis as obsessive fantasy. I made a few tactful enquiries of my assistants, and to my annoyance two of them also vaguely remembered such a person. After this I found myself

unable to drive George de Stael's fancies from my mind. No further news was heard of the missing Leonardo – the complete absence of any clues mystified the police and the art world alike.

Consequently, it was with an immense feeling of relief, as much as of excitement, that I received five weeks later the following telegram:

CHARLES. COME IMMEDIATELY. I HAVE SEEN HIM. GEORG DE STAEL.

This time, as my taxi carried me from Orly Airport to the Madeleine, it was no idle amusement that made me watch the Tuileries Gardens for any sight of a tall man in a black slouch hat sneaking through the trees with a rolled-up canvas under his arm. Was Georg de Stael finally and irretrievably out of his mind, or had he in fact seen the phantom Ahasuerus?

When he greeted me at the doorway of Normande et Cie his handshake was as firm as ever, his face composed and relaxed. In his office he sat back and regarded me quizzically over the tips of his fingers, evidently so sure of himself that he could let his news bide its time.

'He's here, Charles,' he said at last. 'In Paris, staying at the Ritz. He's been attending the sales here of 19th and 20th century masters. With luck you'll see him this afternoon.'

For once my incredulity returned, but before I could stutter my objections Georg silenced me.

'He's just as we expected, Charles. Tall and powerfully built, with a kind of statuesque grace, the sort of man who moves easily among the rich and nobility. Leonardo and Holbein caught him exactly, that strange haunted intensity about his eyes, the wind of deserts and great ravines.'

'When did you first see him?'

'Yesterday afternoon. We had almost completed the 19th century sales when a small Van Gogh – an inferior copy by the painter of *The Good Samaritan* – came up. One of those painted during his last madness, full of turbulent spirals, the figures like tormented beasts. For some reason the Samaritan's face reminded me of Ahasuerus. Just then I looked up across the crowded auction room.' Georg sat forward. 'To my amazement there he was, sitting not three feet away in the front row of seats, staring me straight in the face. I could hardly take my eyes off him. As soon as the bidding started he came in hard, going up in two thousands of francs.'

'He took the painting?'

'No. Luckily I still had my wits about me. Obviously I had to be sure he was the right man. Previously his appearances have been solely as Ahasuerus, but few painters today are doing crucifixions in the *bel canto* style, and he may have tried to redress the balance of guilt by appearing in other roles, the Samaritan for example. He was left alone at 15,000 – actually the reserve was only ten – so I leaned over and had the painting withdrawn. I was sure he would come back today if he was Ahasuerus, and I needed twenty-four hours to get hold of you and the police. Two

of Carnot's men will be here this afternoon. I told them some vague story and they'll be unobtrusive. Anyway, naturally there was the devil's own row when this little Van Gogh was withdrawn. Everyone here thought I'd gone mad. Our dark-faced friend leapt up and demanded the reason, so I had to say that I suspected the authenticity of the painting and was protecting the reputation of the gallery, but if satisfied would put it up the next day.'

'Clever of you,' I commented.

Georg inclined his head. 'I thought so too. It was a neat trap. Immediately he launched into a passionate defence of the painting – normally a man with his obvious experience of sale rooms would have damned it out of hand – bringing up all sorts of details about Vincent's third-rate pigments, the back of the canvas and so on. The *back* of the canvas, note, what the sitter would most remember about a painting. I said I was more or less convinced, and he promised to be back today. He left his address in case any difficulty came up.' Georg took a silver-embossed card from his pocket and read out: '"*Count Enrique Danilewicz, Villa d'Est, Cadaques, Costa Brava.*"' Across the card was enscribed: '*Ritz Hotel, Paris.*'

'Cadaques,' I repeated. 'Dali is nearby there, at Port Lligat. Another coincidence.'

'Perhaps more than a coincidence. Guess what the Catalan master is at present executing for the new Cathedral of St Joseph at San Diego? One of his greatest commissions to date. Exactly! A crucifixion. Our friend Ahasuerus is once more doing his rounds.'

Georg pulled a leather-bound pad from his centre drawer. 'Now listen to this. I've been doing some research on the identity of the models for Ahasuerus – usually some petty princeling or merchant-king. The Leonardo is untraceable. He kept open house, beggars and goats wandered through his studio at will, anyone could have got in and posed. But the others were more select. The Ahasuerus in the Holbein was posed by a Sir Henry Daniels, a leading banker and friend of Henry VIII. In the Veronese by a member of the Council of Ten, none other than the Doge-to-be, Enri Danieli – we've both stayed in the hotel of that name in Venice. In the Rubens by Baron Henrik Nielson, Danish Ambassador to Amsterdam, and in the Goya by a certain Enrico Da Nella, financier and great patron of the Prado. While in the Poussin by the famous dilettante, Henri, Duc de Nile.'

Georg closed the note-book with a flourish. I said: 'It's certainly remarkable.'

'You don't exaggerate. Danilewicz, Daniels, Danieli, Da Nella, de Nile and Nielson. Alias Ahasuerus. You know, Charles, I'm a little frightened, but I think we have the missing Leonardo within our grasp.'

Nothing was more disappointing, therefore, than the failure of our quarry to appear that afternoon.

* * *

The transfer of the Van Gogh from the previous day's sales had fortunately given it a high lot number, after some three dozen 20th century paintings. As the bids for the Kandinskys and Legers came in, I sat on the podium behind Georg, surveying the elegant assembly below. In such an international gathering, of American connoisseurs, English press lords, French and Italian aristocracy, coloured by a generous sprinkling of ladies of the demi-monde, the presence of even the remarkable figure Georg had described would not have been over-conspicuous. However, as we moved steadily down the catalogue, and the flashing of the photographers' bulbs became more and more wearisome, I began to wonder whether he would appear at all. His seat in the front row remained reserved for him, and I waited impatiently for this fugitive through time and space to materialize and make his magnificent entry promptly as the Van Gogh was announced.

As it transpired, both the seat and the painting remained untaken. Put off by Georg's doubts as to its authenticity, the painting failed to reach its reserve, and as the last sales closed we were left alone on the podium, our bait untaken.

'He must have smelled a rat,' Georg whispered, after the attendants had confirmed that Count Danilewicz was not present in any of the other sale-rooms. A moment later a telephone call to the Ritz established that he had vacated his suite and left Paris for the south.

'No doubt he's expert at sidestepping such traps. What now?' I asked.

'Cadaques.'

'Georg! Are you insane?'

'Not at all. There's only a chance, but we must take it! Inspector Carnot will find a plane. I'll invent some fantasy to please him. Come on, Charles, I'm convinced we'll find the Leonardo in his villa.'

We arrived at Barcelona, Carnot in tow, with Superintendent Jurgens of Interpol to smooth our way through customs, and three hours later set off in a posse of police cars for Cadaques. The fast ride along that fantastic coast line, with its monstrous rocks like giant sleeping reptiles and the glazed light over the embalmed sea, reminiscent of all Dali's timeless beaches, was a fitting prelude to the final chapter. The air bled diamonds around us, sparkling off the immense spires of rock, the huge lunar ramparts suddenly giving way to placid bays of luminous water.

The Villa d'Est stood on a promontory a thousand feet above the town, its high walls and shuttered moorish windows glistening in the sunlight like white quartz. The great black doors, like the vaults of a cathedral, were sealed, and a continuous ringing of the bell brought no reply. At this a prolonged wrangle ensued between Jurgens and the local police, who were torn between their reluctance to offend an important local dignitary – Count Danilewicz had evidently founded a dozen scholarships for promising local artists – and their eagerness to partake in the discovery of the missing Leonardo.

Impatient of all this, Georg and I borrowed a car and chauffeur and set off for Port Lligat, promising the Inspector that we would return in time for the commercial airliner which was due to land at Barcelona from Paris some two hours later, presumably carrying Count Danilewicz. 'No doubt, however,' Georg remarked softly as we moved off, 'he travels by other transport.'

What excuse we would make to penetrate the private menage of Spain's most distinguished painter I had not decided, though the possibility of simultaneous one-man shows at Northeby's and Galleries Normande might have appeased him. As we drove down the final approach to the familiar tiered white villa by the water's edge, a large limousine was coming towards us, bearing away a recent guest.

Our two cars passed at a point where the effective width of the road was narrowed by a nexus of pot-holes, and for a moment the heavy saloons wallowed side by side in the dust like two groaning mastodons.

Suddenly, Georg clenched my elbow and pointed through the window. 'Charles! There he is!'

Lowering my window as the drivers cursed each other, I looked out into the dim cabin of the adjacent car. Sitting in the back seat, his head raised to the noise, was a huge Rasputin-like figure in a black pin-stripe suit, his white cuffs and gold tie-pin glinting in the shadows, gloved hands crossed in front of him over an ivory-handled cane. As we edged past I caught a glimpse of his great saturnine head, whose living features matched and corroborated exactly those which I had seen reproduced by so many hands upon so many canvases. The dark eyes glowed with an intense lustre, the black eyebrows rearing from his high forehead like wings, the sharp curve of the beard carrying the sweep of his strong jaw forward into the air like a spear.

Elegantly suited though he was, his whole presence radiated a tremendous restless energy, a powerful charisma that seemed to extend beyond the confines of the car. For a moment we exchanged glances, separated from each other by only two or three feet. He was staring beyond me, however, at some distant landmark, some invisible hill-crest forever silhouetted against the horizon, and I saw in his eyes that expression of irredeemable remorse, of almost hallucinatory despair, untouched by self-pity or any conceivable extenuation, that one imagines on the faces of the damned.

'Stop him!' Georg shouted into the noise. 'Charles, warn him!'

Our car edged upwards out of the final rut, and I shouted through the engine fumes:

'Ahasuerus! Ahasuerus!'

His wild eyes swung back, and he rose forward in his seat, a black arm on the window ledge, like some immense half-crippled angel about to take flight. Then the two cars surged apart, and we were separated from the limousine by a tornado of dust. Enchanted from the placid air, for ten minutes the squall seethed backwards and forwards across us.

By the time it subsided and we had managed to reverse, the great limousine had vanished.

They found the Leonardo in the Villa d'Est, propped against the wall in its great gilt frame in the dining-room. To everyone's surprise the house was found to be completely empty, though two manservants who had been given the day off testified that when they left it that morning it had been lavishly furnished as usual. However, as Georg de Stael remarked, no doubt the vanished tenant had his own means of transport.

The painting had suffered no damage, though the first cursory glance confirmed that a skilled hand had been at work on a small portion. The face of the black-robed figure once again looked upwards to the cross, a hint of hope, perhaps even of redemption, in its wistful gaze. The brush-work had dried, but Georg reported to me that the thin layer of varnish was still tacky.

On our feted and triumphant return to Paris, Georg and I recommended that in view of the hazards already suffered by the painting no further attempts should be made to clean or restore it, and with a grateful sigh the director and staff of the Louvre sealed it back into its wall. The painting may not be entirely by the hand of Leonardo da Vinci, but we feel that the few additions have earned their place.

No further news was heard of Count Danilewicz, but Georg recently told me that a Professor Henrico Daniella was reported to have been appointed director of the Museum of Pan-Christian Art at Santiago. His attempts to communicate with Professor Daniella had failed, but he gathered that the Museum was extremely anxious to build up a large collection of paintings of the Cross.

1964

THE TERMINAL BEACH

At night, as he lay asleep on the floor of the ruined bunker, Traven heard the waves breaking along the shore of the lagoon, like the sounds of giant aircraft warming up at the ends of their runways. This memory of the great night raids against the Japanese mainland had filled his first months on the island with images of burning bombers falling through the air around him. Later, with the attacks of beri-beri, the nightmare passed and the waves began to remind him of the deep Atlantic rollers on the beach at Dakar, where he had been born, and of watching from the window in the evenings for his parents to drive home along the corniche road from the airport. Overcome by this long-forgotten memory, he woke uncertainly from the bed of old magazines on which he slept and went out to the dunes that screened the lagoon.

Through the cold night air he could see the abandoned Superfortresses lying among the palms beyond the perimeter of the emergency landing field three hundred yards away. Traven walked through the dark sand, already forgetting where the shore lay, although the atoll was little more than half a mile in width. Above him, along the crests of the dunes, the tall palms leaned into the dim air like the symbols of a cryptic alphabet. The landscape of the island was covered by strange ciphers.

Giving up the attempt to find the beach, Traven stumbled into a set of tracks left years earlier by a large caterpillar vehicle. The heat released by the weapons tests had fused the sand, and the double line of fossil imprints, uncovered by the evening air, wound its serpentine way among the hollows like the footfalls of an ancient saurian.

Too weak to walk any further, Traven sat down between the tracks. Hoping that they might lead him to the beach, he began to excavate the wedge-shaped grooves from a drift into which they disappeared. He returned to the bunker shortly before dawn, and slept through the hot silences of the following noon.

The Blocks

As usual on these enervating afternoons, when not even a breath of on-shore breeze disturbed the dust, Traven sat in the shadow of one of the blocks, lost somewhere within the centre of the maze. His back resting against the rough concrete surface, he gazed with a phlegmatic eye down the surrounding aisles and at the line of doors facing him. Each afternoon he left his cell in the abandoned camera bunker among

the dunes and walked down into the blocks. For the first half an hour he restricted himself to the perimeter aisle, now and then trying one of the doors with the rusty key in his pocket – found among the litter of smashed bottles and cans in the isthmus of sand separating the testing ground from the air-strip – and then inevitably, with a sort of drugged stride, he set off into the centre of the blocks, breaking into a run and darting in and out of the corridors, as if trying to flush some invisible opponent from his hiding place. Soon he would be completely lost. Whatever his efforts to return to the perimeter, he always found himself once more in the centre.

Eventually he would abandon the task, and sit down in the dust, watching the shadows emerge from their crevices at the foot of the blocks. For some reason he invariably arranged to be trapped when the sun was at zenith – on Eniwetok, the thermonuclear noon.

One question in particular intrigued him: 'What sort of people would inhabit this minimal concrete city?'

The Synthetic Landscape

'This island is a state of mind,' Osborne, one of the scientists working in the old submarine pens, was later to remark to Traven. The truth of this became obvious to Traven within two or three weeks of his arrival. Despite the sand and the few anaemic palms, the entire landscape of the island was synthetic, a man-made artefact with all the associations of a vast system of derelict concrete motorways. Since the moratorium on atomic tests, the island had been abandoned by the Atomic Energy Commission, and the wilderness of weapons aisles, towers and blockhouses ruled out any attempt to return it to its natural state. (There were also stronger unconscious motives, Traven recognized: if primitive man felt the need to assimilate events in the external world to his own psyche, 20th century man had reversed this process; by this Cartesian yardstick, the island at least *existed*, in a sense true of few other places.)

But apart from a few scientific workers, no one yet felt any wish to visit the former testing ground, and the naval patrol boat anchored in the lagoon had been withdrawn three years before Traven's arrival. Its ruined appearance, and the associations of the island with the period of the Cold War – what Traven had christened 'The Pre-Third' – were profoundly depressing, an Auschwitz of the soul whose mausoleums contained the mass graves of the still undead. With the Russo-American *détente* this nightmarish chapter of history had been gladly forgotten.

The Pre-Third

The actual and potential destructiveness of the atomic bomb plays straight into the hands of the Unconscious. The most cursory study of the dream-life and fantasies of the insane shows that ideas of world-destruction are latent in the unconscious mind . . . Nagasaki destroyed by the magic of science

is the nearest man has yet approached to the realization of dreams that even during the safe immobility of sleep are accustomed to develop into nightmares of anxiety.

Glover: 'War, Sadism and Pacifism'

The Pre-Third: the period was characterized in Traven's mind above all by its moral and psychological inversions, by its sense of the whole of history, and in particular of the immediate future – the two decades, 1945–65 – suspended from the quivering volcano's lip of World War III. Even the death of his wife and six-year-old son in a motor accident seemed only part of this immense synthesis of the historical and psychic zero, the frantic highways where each morning they met their deaths the advance causeways to the global armageddon.

Third Beach

He had come ashore at midnight, after a hazardous search for an opening in the reef. The small motorboat he had hired from an Australian pearl-diver at Charlotte Island subsided into the shallows, its hull torn by the sharp coral. Exhausted, Traven walked through the darkness among the dunes, where the dim outlines of bunkers and concrete towers loomed between the palms.

He woke the next morning into bright sunlight, lying halfway down the slope of a wide concrete beach. This ringed an empty reservoir or target basin some two hundred feet in diameter, part of a system of artificial lakes built down the centre of the atoll. Leaves and dust choked the exit grilles, and a pool of warm water two feet deep lay below him, reflecting a distant line of palms.

Traven sat up and took stock of himself. This brief inventory, which merely confirmed his physical identity, was limited to little more than his thin body in its frayed cotton garments. In the context of the surrounding terrain, however, even this collection of tatters seemed to possess a unique vitality. The desolation and emptiness of the island, and the absence of any local fauna, were emphasized by the huge sculptural forms of the target basins set into its surface. Separated from each other by narrow isthmuses, the lakes stretched away along the curve of the atoll. On either side, sometimes shaded by the few palms that had gained a precarious purchase in the cracked cement, were roadways, camera towers and isolated blockhouses, together forming a continuous concrete cap upon the island, a functional, megalithic architecture as grey and minatory (and apparently as ancient, in its projection into, and from, time future) as any of Assyria and Babylon.

The series of weapons tests had fused the sand in layers, and the pseudo-geological strata condensed the brief epochs, microseconds in duration, of thermonuclear time. Typically the island inverted the geologist's maxim, 'The key to the past lies in the present.' Here, the key to the present lay in the future. This island was a fossil of time future, its bunkers and

blockhouses illustrating the principle that the fossil record of life was one of armour and the exoskeleton.

Traven knelt in the warm pool, and splashed his shirt and trousers. The reflection revealed the watery image of gaunt shoulders and bearded face. He had come to the island with no supplies other than a small bar of chocolate, assuming that in some way the island would provide its own sustenance. Perhaps, too, he had identified the need for food with a forward motion in time, and that with his return to the past, or at most into a zone of non-time, this need would be eliminated. The privations of the previous six months, during his journey across the Pacific, had already reduced his always thin body to that of a migrant beggar, held together by little more than the preoccupied gaze in his eye. Yet this emaciation, by stripping away the superfluities of the flesh, revealed an inner sinewy toughness, an economy and directness of movement.

For several hours Traven wandered about, inspecting one bunker after another for a convenient place to sleep. He crossed the remains of a small landing field, next to a dump where a dozen B-29s lay across one another like dead reptile birds.

The Corpses

Once he entered a small street of metal shacks, containing a cafeteria, recreation rooms and shower stalls. A wrecked juke-box lay half-buried in the sand behind the cafeteria, its selection of records still in their rack.

Further along, flung into a small target lake fifty yards from the shacks, were the bodies of what at first he thought were the former inhabitants of this ghost town – a dozen life-size plastic models. Their half-melted faces, contorted into bleary grimaces, gazed up at him from the jumble of legs and torsoes.

On either side of him, muffled by the dunes, came the sounds of waves, the great rollers on the seaward side breaking over the reefs, and on to the beaches within the lagoon. However, he avoided the sea, hesitating before any rise or dune that might take him within its sight. Everywhere the camera towers offered him a convenient aerial view of the confused topography of the island, but he avoided their rusting ladders.

Traven soon realized that however random the blockhouses and towers might seem, their common focus dominated the landscape and gave to it a unique perspective. As he noticed when he sat down to rest in the window slit of one of the bunkers, all these observation posts occupied positions on a series of concentric perimeters, moving in tightening arcs towards the inmost sanctuary. This ultimate circle, below ground zero, remained hidden beyond a line of dunes a quarter of a mile to the west.

The Terminal Bunker

After sleeping for a few nights in the open, Traven returned to the concrete beach where he had woken on his first morning on the island, and made his home – if the term could be applied to that damp crumbling hovel –

in a camera bunker fifty yards from the target lakes. The dark chamber between the thick canted walls, tomb-like though it might seem, gave him a sense of physical reassurance. Outside, the sand drifted against the sides, half-burying the narrow doorway, as if crystallizing the immense epoch of time that had elapsed since the bunker's construction. The narrow rectangles of the five camera slits, their shapes and positions determined by the instruments, studded the west wall like runic ideograms. Variations on these ciphers decorated the walls of the other bunkers, the unique signature of the island. In the mornings, if Traven was awake, he would always find the sun divided into its five emblematic beacons.

Most of the time the chamber was filled only by a damp gloomy light. In the control tower at the landing field Traven found a collection of discarded magazines, and used these to make a bed. One day, lying in the bunker shortly after the first attack of beri-beri, he pulled out a magazine pressing into his back and found inside it a full-page photograph of a six-year-old girl. This blonde-haired child, with her composed expression and self-immersed eyes, filled him with a thousand painful memories of his son. He pinned the page to the wall and for days gazed at it through his reveries.

For the first few weeks Traven made little attempt to leave the bunker, and postponed any further exploration of the island. The symbolic journey through its inner circles set its own times of arrival and departure. He evolved no routine for himself. All sense of time soon vanished, and his life became completely existential, an absolute break separating one moment from the next like two quantal events. Too weak to forage for food, he lived on the old ration packs he found in the wrecked Superfortresses. Without any implement, it took him all day to open the cans. His physical decline continued, but he watched his spindling legs and arms with indifference.

By now he had forgotten the existence of the sea and vaguely assumed the atoll to be part of some continuous continental table. A hundred yards to the north and south of the bunker a line of dunes, topped by the palisade of enigmatic palms, screened the lagoon and sea, and the faint muffled drumming of the waves at night had fused with his memories of war and childhood. To the east was the emergency landing strip and the abandoned aircraft. In the afternoon light their shifting rectilinear shadows made them appear to writhe and pivot. In front of the bunker, where he would sit, was the system of target lakes, the shallow basins extending across the atoll.

Above him, the five apertures looked out upon this scene like the tutelary symbols of a futuristic myth.

The Lakes and the Spectres

The lakes had been designed to reveal any radiobiological changes in a selected range of fauna, but the specimens had long since bloomed into grotesque parodies of themselves and been destroyed.

Sometimes in the evenings, when a sepulchral light lay over the concrete

bunkers and causeways, and the basins seemed like ornamental lakes in a city of deserted mausoleums, abandoned even by the dead, he would see the spectres of his wife and son standing on the opposite bank. Their solitary figures appeared to have been watching him for hours. Although they never moved, Traven was sure they were beckoning to him. Roused from his reverie, he would stumble forward across the dark sand to the edge of the lake and wade through the water, shouting soundlessly at the two figures as they moved away hand in hand among the lakes and disappeared across the distant causeways.

Shivering with cold, Traven would return to the bunker and lie on the bed of old magazines, waiting for their return. The image of their faces, the pale lantern of his wife's cheeks, floated on the river of his memory.

The Blocks (II)

It was not until he discovered the blocks that Traven realized he would never leave the island.

At this stage, some two months after his arrival, Traven had exhausted his small cache of food, and the symptoms of beri-beri had become more acute. The numbness in his hands and feet, and the gradual loss of strength, continued. Only by an immense effort, and the knowledge that the inner sanctum of the island still lay unexplored, did he manage to leave the palliasse of magazines and make his way from the bunker.

As he sat in the drift of sand by the doorway that evening, he noticed a light shining through the palms far into the distance around the atoll. Confusing this with the image of his wife and son, and visualizing them waiting for him at some warm hearth among the dunes, Traven set off towards the light. Within a hundred yards he lost his sense of direction. He blundered about for several hours on the edges of the landing strip, and succeeded only in cutting his foot on a broken coca-cola bottle in the sand.

After postponing his search for the night, he set out again in earnest the next morning. As he moved past the towers and blockhouses the heat lay over the island in an unbroken mantle. He had entered a zone devoid of time. Only the narrowing perimeters warned him that he was crossing the inner field of the fire-table.

He climbed the ridge which marked the furthest point in his previous exploration of the island. From the plain below it the recording towers rose into the air like obelisks. Traven walked down towards them. On their grey walls were the faint outlines of human forms in stylized poses, the flash-shadows of the target community burnt into the cement. Here and there, where the concrete apron had cracked, a line of palms hung in the motionless air. The target lakes were smaller, filled with the broken bodies of plastic models. Most of them lay in the inoffensive domestic postures into which they had been placed before the tests.

Beyond the furthest line of dunes, where the camera towers began to turn and face him, were the tops of what seemed to be a herd of

square-backed elephants. They were drawn up in precise ranks in a hollow that formed a shallow corral, the sunlight reflected off their backs.

Traven advanced towards them, limping on his cut foot. On either side of him the loosening sand had excavated the dunes, and several of the blockhouses tilted on their sides. This plain of bunkers stretched for some quarter of a mile, the half-submerged hulks, bombed out onto the surface in some earlier test, like the abandoned wombs that had given birth to this herd of megaliths.

The Blocks (III)

To grasp something of the vast number and oppressive size of the blocks, and their impact upon Traven, one must try to visualize sitting in the shade of one of these concrete monsters, or walking about in the centre of this enormous labyrinth that extended across the central table of the island. There were two thousand of them, each a perfect cube 15 feet in height, regularly spaced at ten-yard intervals. They were arranged in a series of tracts, each composed of two hundred blocks, inclined to one another and to the direction of the blast. They had weathered only slightly in the years since they were first built, and their gaunt profiles were like the cutting faces of a gigantic die-plate, devised to stamp out rectilinear volumes of air the size of a house. Three of the sides were smooth and unbroken, but the fourth, facing away from the blast, contained a narrow inspection door.

It was this feature of the blocks that Traven found particularly disturbing. Despite the considerable number of doors, by some freak of perspective only those in a single aisle were visible at any point within the maze. As he walked from the perimeter line into the centre of the massif, line upon line of the small metal doors appeared and receded.

Approximately twenty of the blocks, those immediately below ground zero, were solid: the walls of the remainder were of varying thicknesses. From the outside they appeared to be of uniform solidity.

As he entered the first of the long aisles, Traven felt the sense of fatigue that had dogged him for so many months begin to lift. With their geometric regularity and finish, the blocks seemed to occupy more than their own volumes of space, imposing on him a mood of absolute calm and order. He walked on into the centre of the maze, eager to shut out the rest of the island. After a few random turns to left and right, he found himself alone, the vistas to the sea, lagoon and island closed.

Here he sat down with his back to one of the blocks, the quest for his wife and son forgotten. For the first time since his arrival at the island the sense of dissociation set off by its derelict landscape began to recede.

One development he did not expect. With dusk, and the need to leave the blocks and find food, he realized that he had lost himself. However he retraced his steps, struck out left or right at an oblique course, oriented himself around the sun and pressed on resolutely north or south, he found himself back again at his starting point. Only when darkness came did he manage to make his escape.

Abandoning his former home near the aircraft dump, Traven collected together what canned food he could find in the waist turret and cockpit lockers of the Superfortresses. He pulled them across the atoll on a crude sledge. Fifty yards from the perimeter of the blocks he took over a tilting bunker, and pinned the fading photograph of the blonde-haired child to the wall beside the door. The page was falling to pieces, like a fragmenting mirror of himself. Since the discovery of the blocks he had become a creature of reflexes, kindled from levels above those of his existing nervous system (if the autonomic system was dominated by the past, Traven sensed, the cerebro-spinal reached towards the future). Each evening when he woke he would eat without appetite and then wander among the blocks. Sometimes he took a canteen of water with him and remained there for two or three days on end.

The Submarine Pens

This precarious existence continued for the following weeks. As he walked out to the blocks one evening, he again saw his wife and son, standing among the dunes below a solitary camera tower, their faces watching him expressionlessly. He realized that they had followed him across the island from their former haunt among the dried-up lakes. At about this time he once again saw the distant light beckoning, and decided to continue his exploration of the island.

Half a mile further along the atoll he found a group of four submarine pens, built over an inlet, now drained, which wound through the dunes from the sea. The pens still contained several feet of water, filled with strange luminescent fish and plants. The warning light winked at intervals from the apex of a metal scaffold. The remains of a substantial camp, only recently vacated, stood on the pier outside. Greedily, Traven heaped his sledge with the provisions stored inside one of the metal shacks.

With this change of diet, the beri-beri receded, and during the next days he returned often to the camp. It appeared to be the site of a biological expedition. In the field office he came across a series of large charts of mutated chromosomes. He rolled them up and took them back to his bunker. The abstract patterns were meaningless, but during his recovery he amused himself by devising suitable titles for them. (Later, passing the aircraft dump on one of his forays, he found the half-buried juke-box, and tore the list of records from the selection panel, realizing that these were the most appropriate captions. Thus embroidered, the charts took on many layers of associations.)

Traven: In Parenthesis

Elements in a quantal world:

The terminal beach.

The terminal bunker.

The blocks.

* * *

The landscape is coded.

Entry points into the future=Levels in a spinal landscape=zones of significant time.

August 5. Found the man Traven. A strange derelict figure, hiding in a bunker in the deserted interior of the island. He is suffering from severe exposure and malnutrition, but is unaware of this or, for that matter, of any other events in the world around him . . .

He maintains that he came to the island to carry out some scientific project – unstated – but I suspect that he understands his real motives and the unique role of the island . . . In some way its landscape seems to be involved with certain unconscious notions of time, and in particular with those that may be a repressed premonition of our own deaths. The attractions and dangers of such an architecture, as the past has shown, need no stressing . . .

August 6. He has the eyes of the possessed. I would guess that he is neither the first, nor the last, to visit the island.

– from Dr C. Osborne, 'Eniwetok Diary.'

Traven lost within the Blocks

With the exhaustion of his supplies, Traven remained within the perimeter of the blocks almost continuously, conserving what strength remained to him to walk slowly down their empty corridors. The infection in his right foot made it difficult for him to replenish his supplies from the stores left by the biologists, and as his strength ebbed he found progressively less incentive to make his way out of the blocks. The system of megaliths now provided a complete substitute for those functions of his mind which gave to it its sense of the sustained rational order of time and space. Without them, his awareness of reality shrank to little more than the few square inches of sand beneath his feet.

On one of his last ventures into the maze, he spent all night and much of the following morning in a futile attempt to escape. Dragging himself from one rectangle of shadow to another, his leg as heavy as a club and apparently inflamed to the knee, he realized that he must soon find an equivalent for the blocks or he would end his life within them, trapped inside this self-constructed mausoleum as surely as the retinue of Pharaoh.

He was sitting helplessly somewhere in the centre of the system, the faceless lines of tomb-booths receding from him, when the sky was slowly divided by the drone of a light aircraft. This passed overhead, and then returned five minutes later. Seizing his opportunity, Traven struggled to his feet and made his exit from the blocks, his head raised to follow the faintly glistening beacon of the exhaust trail.

As he lay in the bunker he dimly heard the aircraft return and carry out an inspection of the site.

A Belated Rescue

'Who are you? Do you realize you're on your last legs?'

'Traven . . . I've had some sort of accident. I'm glad you flew over.'

'I'm sure you are. But why didn't you use our radio-telephone? Anyway, we'll call the Navy and have you picked up.'

'No . . .' Traven sat up on one elbow and felt weakly in his hip pocket. 'I have a pass somewhere. I'm carrying out research.'

'Into what?' The question assumed a complete understanding of Traven's motives. He lay in the shade under the lee of the bunker, and drank weakly from a canteen as Dr Osborne dressed his foot. 'You've also been stealing our stores.'

Traven shook his head. Fifty yards away the striped blue Cessna stood on the concrete apron like a brilliant dragonfly. 'I didn't realize you were coming back.'

'You must be in a trance.'

The young woman sitting at the controls of the aircraft climbed out and walked over to them. She glanced at the grey bunkers and towers, and seemed uninterested in the decrepit figure of Traven. Osborne spoke to her and after a downward glance at Traven she went back to the aircraft. As she turned Traven rose involuntarily, recognizing the child in the photograph he had pinned to the wall of the bunker. Then he remembered that the magazine could not have been more than four or five years old.

The engine of the aircraft started. As Traven watched, it turned on to one of the roadways and took off into the wind.

Later that afternoon the young woman drove over to the blocks by jeep and unloaded a small camp-bed and a canvas awning. During the intervening hours Traven had slept. He woke refreshed when Osborne returned from his scrutiny of the surrounding dunes.

'What are you doing here?' the young woman asked as she secured the guy-ropes to the roof of the bunker.

Traven watched her move about. 'I'm . . . searching for my wife and son.'

'They're on this island?' Surprised, but taking the reply at face value, she looked around her. 'Here?'

'In a manner of speaking.'

After inspecting the bunker, Osborne joined them. 'The child in the photograph – is she your daughter?'

Traven hesitated. 'No. She's adopted *me*.'

Unable to make any sense of his replies, but accepting his assurances that he would leave the island, Osborne and the young woman drove back to their camp. Each day Osborne returned to change the dressing, driven by the young woman, who seemed now to grasp the role cast for her by Traven. Osborne, when he learned of Traven's previous career as a military pilot, appeared to suspect that he might be a

latter-day martyr left high and dry by the moratorium on thermonuclear tests.

'A guilt complex isn't an indiscriminate supply of moral sanctions. I think you may be overstretching yours.' When he mentioned the name Eatherly, Traven shook his head.

Undeterred, Osborne pressed: 'Are you sure you're not making similar use of the image of Eniwetok – waiting for your Pentecostal wind?'

'Believe me, Doctor, no,' Traven replied firmly. 'For me the hydrogen bomb was a symbol of absolute *freedom*. I feel it's given me the right – the obligation, even – to do anything I want.'

'That seems strange logic,' Osborne commented. 'Aren't we at least responsible for our physical selves, if for nothing else?'

'Not now, I think,' Traven replied. 'After all, in effect we are men raised from the dead.'

Often, however, he thought of Eatherly: the prototypal Pre-Third Man – dating the Pre-Third from August 6, 1945 – carrying a full load of cosmic guilt.

Shortly after Traven was strong enough to walk, he had to be rescued from the blocks for a second time. Osborne became less conciliatory.

'Our work is almost complete,' he said warningly. 'You'll die here, Traven. What *are* you looking for among those blocks?'

To himself, Traven murmured: the tomb of the unknown civilian, *Homo hydrogenensis*, Eniwetok Man. 'Doctor,' he said, 'your laboratory is at the wrong end of this island.'

Tartly, Osborne replied: 'I'm aware of that, Traven. There are rarer fish swimming in your head than in any submarine pen.'

On the day before they left, the young woman drove Traven over to the lakes where he had first arrived. As a final present, an ironic gesture unexpected from the elderly biologist, she had brought from Osborne the correct list of legends for the chromosome charts. They stopped by the derelict juke-box and she pasted them on to the selection panel.

They wandered among the supine wrecks of the Superfortresses. Traven lost sight of her, and for the next ten minutes searched in and out of the dunes. He found her standing in a small amphitheatre formed by the sloping mirrors of a solar energy device built by one of the visiting expeditions. She smiled to Traven as he stepped through the scaffolding. A dozen fragmented images of herself were reflected in the broken panes – in some she was sans head, in others multiples of her arms circled about her like the serpent limbs of a Hindu goddess. Confused, Traven turned and walked back to the jeep.

As they drove away he recovered himself. He described his glimpses of his wife and son. 'Their faces are always calm,' he said. 'My son's particularly, though really he was always laughing. The only time his

face was grave was when he was being born – then he seemed millions of years old.'

The young woman nodded. 'I hope you find them.' As an afterthought she added: 'Dr Osborne is going to tell the Navy that you're here. Hide somewhere.'

Traven thanked her.

From the centre of the blocks he waved to her the following day when she flew away for the last time.

The Naval Party

When the search party came for him Traven hid in the only logical place. Fortunately the search was perfunctory, and was called off after a few hours. The sailors had brought a supply of beer with them and the search soon turned into a drunken ramble.

On the walls of the recording towers Traven later found balloons of obscene dialogue chalked into the mouths of the shadowy figures, giving their postures the priapic gaiety of the dancers in cave drawings.

The climax of the party was the ignition of a store of gasoline in an underground tank near the airstrip. As he listened, first to the megaphones shouting his name, the echoes receding among the dunes like the forlorn calls of dying birds, then to the boom of the explosion and the laughter as the landing craft left, Traven felt a premonition that these were the last sounds he would hear.

He had hidden in one of the target basins, lying among the broken bodies of the plastic models. In the hot sunlight their deformed faces gaped at him sightlessly from the tangle of limbs, their blurred smiles like those of the soundlessly laughing dead.

Their faces filled his mind as he climbed over the bodies and returned to his bunker. As he walked towards the blocks he saw the figures of his wife and son standing in his path. They were less than ten yards from him, their white faces watching him with a look of almost overwhelming expectancy. Never had Traven seen them so close to the blocks. His wife's pale features seemed illuminated from within, her lips parted as if in greeting, one hand raised to take his own. His son's face, with its curiously fixed expression, regarded him with the same enigmatic smile of the child in the photograph.

'Judith! David!' Startled, Traven ran forwards to them. Then, in a sudden movement of light, their clothes turned into shrouds, and he saw the wounds that disfigured their necks and chests. Appalled, he cried out. As they vanished, he ran off into the safety of the blocks.

The Catechism of Goodbye

This time he found himself, as Osborne had predicted, unable to leave the blocks.

Somewhere in the centre of the maze, he sat with his back against one of the concrete flanks, his eyes raised to the sun. Around him the lines of

cubes formed the horizon of his world. At times they would appear to advance towards him, looming over him like cliffs, the intervals between them narrowing so that they were little more than an arm's length apart, a labyrinth of corridors running between them. They then would recede from him, separating from each other like points in an expanding universe, until the nearest line formed an intermittent palisade along the horizon.

Time had become quantal. For hours it would be noon, the shadows contained within the blocks, the heat reflected off the concrete floor. Abruptly, he would find that it was early afternoon or evening, the shadows everywhere like pointing fingers.

'Goodbye, Eniwetok,' he murmured.

Somewhere there was a flicker of light, as if one of the blocks, like a counter on an abacus, had been plucked away.

Goodbye, Los Alamos. Again, a block seemed to vanish. The corridors around him remained intact, but somewhere in his mind had appeared a small interval of neutral space.

Goodbye, Hiroshima.

Goodbye, Alamagordo.

'Goodbye, Moscow, London, Paris, New York . . .'

Shuttles flickered, a ripple of lost integers. He stopped, realizing the futility of this megathlon farewell. Such a leave-taking required him to fix his signature upon every one of the particles in the universe.

Total Noon: Eniwetok

The blocks now occupied positions on an endlessly revolving circus wheel. They carried him upwards into the sky, from where he could see the whole island and the sea, and then down again through the opaque disc of the concrete floor. From here he looked up at the under-surface of the concrete cap, an inverted landscape of rectilinear hollows, the dome-shaped mounds of the lake-system, the thousands of empty cubic pits of the blocks.

'Goodbye, Traven.'

Near the end, he found to his disappointment that this ultimate rejection gained him nothing.

In the interval of lucidity, he looked down at his emaciated arms and legs, decorated with a lace-work of ulcers. To his right was a trail of disturbed dust, the wavering marks of slack heels.

To his left lay a long corridor between the blocks, joining an oblique series a hundred yards away. Among these, where a narrow interval revealed the open space beyond, was a crescent-shaped shadow, poised in the air above the ground.

During the next half an hour it moved slowly, turning as the sun swung, the profile of a dune.

The Crevice

Seizing on this cipher, which hung before him like a symbol on a shield, Traven pushed himself through the dust. He climbed precariously to his feet, and shielded his eyes from the blocks. He moved forward a few paces at a time.

Ten minutes later he emerged from the western perimeter of the blocks, like a tottering mendicant leaving behind a silent desert city. The dune lay fifty yards in front of him. Beyond it, bearing the shadow like a screen, was a ridge of limestone that ran away among the hillocks of the wasteland beyond this point of the atoll. The remains of an old bulldozer, bales of barbed wire and fifty-gallon drums lay half-buried in the sand. Traven approached the dune, reluctant to leave this anonymous swell of sand. He shuffled around its edges, and sat down in the mouth of a shallow crevice below the brow of the ridge.

After dusting his clothes, he gazed out patiently at the great circle of blocks.

Ten minutes later he noticed that someone was watching him.

The Marooned Japanese

This corpse, whose eyes stared up at Traven, lay to his left at the bottom of the crevice. That of a man of middle age and strong build, it rested on its back with its head on a pillow of stone, hands outstretched at its sides, as if surveying the window of the sky. The fabric of the clothes had rotted to a bleached grey vestment, but in the absence of any small animal predators on the island the skin and musculature of the corpse had been preserved. Here and there, at the angle of knee or wrist, a bony point glinted through the leathery integument of the skin, but the facial mask was still intact, and revealed a male Japanese of the professional classes. Looking down at the strong nose, high forehead and broad mouth, Traven guessed that the Japanese had been a doctor or lawyer.

Puzzled as to how the corpse had found itself here, Traven slid a few feet down the slope. There were no radiation burns on the skin, which indicated that the Japanese had been there for five years or less. Nor did he appear to be wearing a uniform, so had not been some unfortunate member of a military or scientific party.

To the left of the corpse, within reach of his left hand, was a frayed leather case, the remains of a map wallet. To the right was the husk of a haversack, open to reveal a canteen of water and a small mess-tin.

Traven slid down the slope until his feet touched the splitting soles of the corpse's shoes, the reflex of starvation making him for the moment ignore that the Japanese had deliberately chosen to die in the crevice. He reached out and seized the canteen. A cupful of flat water swilled around the rusting bottom. Traven gulped down the water, the dissolved metal salts cloaking his lips and tongue with a bitter film. The mess-tin was empty except for a tacky coating of condensed syrup. Traven prised at

this with the lid, and chewed at the tarry flakes, letting them dissolve in his mouth with an almost intoxicating sweetness. After a few moments he felt light-headed and sat back beside the corpse. Its sightless eyes regarded him with unmoving compassion.

The Fly

(A small fly, which Traven presumes has followed him into the fissure, now buzzes about the corpse's face. Guiltily, Traven leans forward to kill it, then reflects that perhaps this minuscule sentry has been the corpse's faithful companion, in return fed on the rich liqueurs and distillations of its pores. Carefully, to avoid injuring the fly, he encourages it to alight on his wrist.)

DR YASUDA: Thank you, Traven. In my position, you understand . . .

TRAVEN: Of course, Doctor. I'm sorry I tried to kill it – these ingrained habits, you know, they're not easy to shrug off. Your sister's children in Osaka in '44, the exigencies of war, I hate to plead them. Most known motives are so despicable, one searches the unknown in the hope that . . .

YASUDA: Please, Traven, do not be embarrassed. The fly is lucky to retain its identity for so long. That son you mourn, not to mention my own two nieces and nephew, did they not die each day? Every parent in the world grieves for the lost sons and daughters of their earlier childhoods.

TRAVEN: You're very tolerant, Doctor. I wouldn't dare –

YASUDA: Not at all, Traven. I make no apologies for you. Each of us is little more than the meagre residue of the infinite unrealized possibilities of our lives. But your son, and my nephew, are fixed in our minds forever, their identities as certain as the stars.

TRAVEN: (*not entirely convinced*) That may be so, Doctor, but it leads to a dangerous conclusion in the case of this island. For instance, the blocks –

YASUDA: They are precisely what I refer to, Traven. Here among the blocks you at last find an image of yourself free of the hazards of time and space. This island is an ontological Garden of Eden, why seek to expel yourself into a world of quantal flux?

TRAVEN: Excuse me (*The fly has flown back to the corpse's face and sits in one of the dried-up orbits, giving the good doctor an expression of quizzical beadiness. Reaching forward, Traven entices it on to his palm. He examines it carefully*) Well, yes, these bunkers may be ontological objects, but whether this is the ontological fly is doubtful. It's true that on this island it's the *only* fly, which is the next best thing . . .

YASUDA: You can't accept the plurality of the universe – ask yourself why, Traven. Why should this obsess you? It seems to me that you are hunting for the white leviathan, zero. The beach is a dangerous zone. Avoid it. Have a proper humility, pursue a philosophy of acceptance.

TRAVEN: Then may I ask why you came here, Doctor?

YASUDA: To feed this fly. 'What greater love –?'
TRAVEN: (*Still puzzling*) It doesn't really solve my problem. The blocks, you see . . .
YASUDA: Very well, if you must have it that way . . .
TRAVEN: But, Doctor –
YASUDA: (*Peremptorily*) Kill that fly!
TRAVEN: That's not an end, or a beginning.
(Hopelessly, he kills the fly. Exhausted, he falls asleep beside the corpse.)

The Terminal Beach

Searching for a piece of rope in the refuse dump behind the dunes, Traven found a bale of rusty wire. After unwinding it, he secured a harness around the corpse's chest and dragged it from the crevice. The lid of a wooden crate made a crude sledge. Traven fastened the corpse to it in a sitting position, and set off along the perimeter of the blocks. Around him the island remained silent. The lines of palms hung in the sunlight, only his own motion varying the shifting ciphers of their criss-crossing trunks. The square turrets of the camera towers jutted from the dunes like forgotten obelisks.

An hour later, when Traven reached the awning by his bunker, he untied the wire cord he had fastened around his waist. He took the chair left for him by Dr Osborne and carried it to a point midway between the bunker and the blocks. Then he tied the body of the Japanese to the chair, arranging the hands so that they rested on the wooden arms giving the moribund figure a posture of calm repose.

This done to his satisfaction, Traven returned to the bunker and squatted under the awning.

As the next days passed into weeks, the dignified figure of the Japanese sat in his chair fifty yards from him, guarding Traven from the blocks. He now had sufficient strength to rouse himself at intervals and forage for food. In the hot sunlight the skin of the Japanese became more and more bleached, and Traven would wake at night and find the sepulchral figure sitting there, arms resting at its sides, in the shadows that crossed the concrete floor. At these moments he would often see his wife and son watching him from the dunes. As time passed they came closer, and he would sometimes find them only a few yards behind him.

Patiently Traven waited for them to speak to him, thinking of the great blocks whose entrance was guarded by the seated figure of the dead archangel, as the waves broke on the distant shore and the burning bombers fell through his dreams.

1964

THE ILLUMINATED MAN

By day fantastic birds flew through the petrified forest, and jewelled alligators glittered like heraldic salamanders on the banks of the crystalline rivers. By night the illuminated man raced among the trees, his arms like golden cartwheels, his head like a spectral crown . . .

During the last year, since the news of what is now variously known as the Hubble Effect, the Rostov-Lysenko Syndrome and the LePage Amplification Synchronoclasmique first gained worldwide attention, there have been so many conflicting reports from the three focal areas in Florida, Byelorussia and Madagascar that I feel it necessary to preface my own account of the phenomenon with the assurance that it is entirely based upon first-hand experience. All the events I describe were witnessed by myself during the recent, almost tragic visit to the Florida Everglades arranged by the United States government for the scientific attachés in Washington. The only facts I was not able to verify are the details of Charles Foster Marquand's life which I obtained from Captain Shelley, the late chief of police at Maynard, and although he was a biased and untrustworthy witness I feel that in this single case he was almost certainly accurate.

How much longer remains before all of us, wherever we are, become expert authorities upon the exact nature of the Hubble Effect is still open to conjecture. As I write, here within the safety and peace of the garden of the British Embassy at Puerto Rico, I see a report in today's *New York Times* that the whole of the Florida peninsula, with the exception of a single highway to Tampa, has been closed and that to date some three million of the state's inhabitants have been resettled in other parts of the United States. But apart from the estimated losses in real estate values and hotel revenues ('Oh, Miami,' I cannot help saying to myself, 'you city of a thousand cathedrals to the rainbow sun') the news of this extraordinary human migration seems to have prompted little comment. Such is mankind's innate optimism, our conviction that we can survive any deluge or cataclysm, that we unconsciously dismiss the momentous events in Florida with a shrug, confident that some means will be found to avert the crisis when it comes.

And yet it now seems obvious that the real crisis is long past. Tucked away on a back page of the same *New York Times* is a short report of the

sighting of another 'double galaxy' by observers at the Hubble Institute on Mount Palomar. The news is summarized in less than a dozen lines and without comment, although the implication is inescapable that yet another focal area has been set up somewhere on the earth's surface, perhaps in the temple-filled jungles of Cambodia or the haunted amber forests of the Chilean highland. But it is only a year since the Mount Palomar astronomers identified the first double galaxy in the constellation Andromeda, the great oblate diadem that is probably the most beautiful object in the universe, the island galaxy of M 31.

Although these sightings by now seem commonplace, and at least half a dozen 'double constellations' can be picked from the night sky on any evening of the week, four months ago when the party of scientific attachés landed at Miami Airport on a conducted tour of the stricken area there was still widespread ignorance of what the Hubble Effect (as the phenomenon had been christened in the Western Hemisphere and the English-speaking world) actually involved. Apart from a handful of forestry workers and biologists from the US Department of Agriculture, few qualified observers had witnessed the phenomenon and there were implausible stories in the newspapers of the forest 'crystallizing' and everything 'turning into coloured glass'.

One unfortunate consequence of the Hubble Effect is that it is virtually impossible to photograph anything transformed by it. As any reader of scientific journals knows, glassware is extremely difficult to reproduce, and even blocks of the highest screen on the best quality art papers – let alone the coarse blocks used on newsprint – have failed to reproduce the brilliant multi-faceted lattices of the Hubble Effect, with their myriads of interior prisms, as anything more than a vague blur like half-melted snow.

Perhaps in retaliation, the newspapers had begun to suggest that the secrecy which surrounded the affected area in the Everglades – then no more than three or four acres of forest to the north-east of Maynard – was being deliberately imposed by the administration, and a clamour was raised about the rights of inspection and the unseen horrors concealed from the public. It so happened that the focal area discovered by Professor Auguste LePage in Madagascar – in the Matarre Valley, far into the hinterland of the island – was about 150 miles from the nearest road-head and totally inaccessible, while the Soviet authorities had clamped a security cordon as tight as Los Alamos's around their own affected area in the Pripet Marshes of Byelorussia, where a legion of scientific workers under the leadership of the metabiologist Lysenko (all, incidentally, chasing a complete red herring) was analysing every facet of the inexplicable phenomenon.

Before any political capital could be made from this campaign, the Department of Agriculture in Washington announced that all facilities for inspection would be gladly provided, and the invitation to the scientific attachés proceeded as part of the programme of technical missions and tours.

As we drove westwards from Miami Airport it was immediately obvious that in a sense the newspapers had been right, and that there was far more to the Hubble Effect than the official handouts had let us believe. The highway to Maynard had been closed to general traffic, and our bus twice overtook military convoys within twenty miles of Miami. In addition, as if to remind us of the celestial origin of the phenomenon, the news of yet another manifestation came through on the radio bulletins.

'There's an Associated Press report from New Delhi,' George Schneider, the West German attaché, came aft to tell us. 'This time there are millions of reliable witnesses. Apparently it should have been plainly visible in the Western Hemisphere last night. Did none of you see it?'

Paul Mathieu, our French confrere, pulled a droll face. 'Last night I was looking at the moon, my dear George, not the Echo satellite. It sounds ominous, but if Venus now has two lamps, so much the better.'

Involuntarily we looked out through the windows, searching above the roadside pines for any glimpse of the Echo satellite. According to the AP reports its luminosity had increased by at least ten-fold, transforming the thin pinpoint of light which had burrowed across the night sky for so many faithful years into a brilliant luminary outshone only by the moon. All over Asia, from the refugee camps on the shores of the Jordan to the crowded tenements of Shanghai, it was being observed at the very moment we were making our fifty mile drive to Maynard.

'Perhaps the balloon is breaking up,' I suggested in a lame effort to revive our spirits. 'The fragments of aluminium paint will be highly reflective and form a local cloud like a gigantic mirror. It's probably nothing to do with the Hubble Effect.'

'I'm sorry, James. I wish we could believe that.' Sidney Reston, of the State Department, who was acting as our courier, interrupted his conversation with the US Army major in charge of the bus to sit down with us. 'But it looks as if they're very much connected. All the other satellites aloft are showing the same increased albedo, seems more and more like a case of "Hubble bubble, double trouble".'

This absurd jingle echoed in my ears as we neared the eastern fringes of Big Cypress Swamp. Five miles from Maynard we left the highway and turned on to a rough track which ran through the date palms towards the Opotoka River. The surface of the road had been churned by scores of tracked vehicles, and a substantial military camp had been set up among the great oaks, the lines of tents hidden by the grey festoons of the spanish moss. Large piles of collapsible metal fencing were being unloaded from the trucks, and I noticed a squad of men painting a number of huge black signs with a vivid luminous paint.

'Are we going on manoeuvres, major?' the Swedish member of our party complained as the dust filled the cabin. 'We wished to see the forest near Maynard. Why have we left the highway?'

'The highway is closed,' the major replied evenly. 'You'll be taken on

a tour of the site, I assure you, gentlemen. The only safe approach is by river.'

'*Safe* approach?' I repeated to Reston. 'I say, what is this, Sidney?'

'Just the army, James,' he assured me. 'You know what they're like in emergencies. If a tree moves they declare war on it.' With a shake of his head he peered out at the activity around us. 'But I admit I can't see why they have to proclaim martial law.'

Reaching the bank of the river, where half a dozen amphibious vehicles were moored by a floating quay, we debarked from the bus and were taken into a large quonset used for briefing visitors. Here we found some fifty or sixty other notables – senior members of government laboratories, public health officials and science journalists – who had been brought by bus from Miami earlier that morning. The atmosphere of light-hearted banter barely concealed a growing uneasiness, but the elaborate precautions of the military still seemed ludicrously exaggerated. After an interval for coffee we were officially welcomed and issued with our instructions for the day. These warned us in particular to remain strictly within the marked perimeters, not to attempt to obtain any of the 'contaminated material', and above all never to linger at any one spot but always to remain in rapid motion.

Needless to say, the pantomime humour of all this was lost on none of us and we were in high spirits when we set off down the river in three of the landing craft, the green walls of the forest slipping past on either side. I noticed immediately the quieter mood, by contrast, of the passenger beside me. A slimly built man of about forty, he was wearing a white tropical suit which emphasized the thin rim of dark beard framing his face. His black hair was brushed low over a bony forehead, and with the jaundiced gaze in his small liquid eyes gave him the appearance of a moody D. H. Lawrence. I made one or two attempts to talk to him, but he smiled briefly and looked away across the water. I assumed that he was one of the research chemists or biologists.

Two miles downstream we met a small convoy of motor launches harnessed together behind a landing craft. All of them were crammed with cargo, their decks and cabin roofs loaded with household possessions of every sort, baby carriages and mattresses, washing machines and bundles of linen, so that there were only a few precarious inches of freeboard amidships. Solemn-faced children sat with suitcases on their knees above the freight, and they and their parents gazed at us stonily as we passed.

Now it is a curious thing, but one seldom sees on the faces of Americans the expression of wan resignation all too familiar to the traveller elsewhere in the world, that sense of cowed helplessness before natural or political disaster seen in the eyes of refugees from Caporetto to Korea, and its unmistakable stamp upon the families moving past us abruptly put an end to our light-hearted mood. As the last of the craft pushed slowly through the disturbed water we all turned and watched it silently, aware that in a sense it carried ourselves.

'What *is* going on?' I said to the bearded man. 'They look as if they're evacuating the town!'

He laughed crisply, finding an unintended irony in my remark. 'Agreed – it's pretty pointless! But I guess they'll come back in due course.'

Irritated by this elliptical comment delivered in a curt off-hand voice – he had looked away again, engrossed upon some more interesting inner topic – I turned and joined my colleagues.

'But why is the Russian approach so different?' George Schneider was asking. 'Is the Hubble Effect the same as this Lysenko Syndrome? Perhaps it is a different phenomenon?'

One of the Department of Agriculture biologists, a grey-haired man carrying his jacket over one arm, shook his head. 'No, they're almost certainly identical. Lysenko as usual is wasting the Soviets' time. He maintains that crop yields are increased because there's an increase in tissue weight. But the Hubble Effect is much closer to a cancer as far as we can see – and about as curable – a proliferation of the sub-atomic identity of all matter. It's almost as if a sequence of displaced but identical images were being produced by refraction through a prism, but with the element of time replacing the role of light.' As it transpired, these were prophetic words.

We were rounding a bend as the river widened in its approach towards Maynard, and the water around the two landing craft ahead was touched by a curious roseate sheen, as if reflecting a distant sunset or the flames of some vast silent conflagration. The sky, however, remained a bland limpid blue, devoid of all cloud. Then we passed below a small bridge, where the river opened into a wide basin a quarter of a mile in diameter.

With a simultaneous gasp of surprise we all craned forward, staring at the line of jungle facing the white-framed buildings of the town. Instantly I realized that the descriptions of the forest 'crystallizing' and 'turning into coloured glass' were exactly truthful. The long arc of trees hanging over the water dripped and glittered with myriads of prisms, the trunks and fronds of the date palms sheathed by bars of livid yellow and carmine light that bled away across the surface of the water, so that the whole scene seemed to be reproduced by an over-active technicolor process. The entire length of the opposite shore glittered with this blurred chiaroscuro, the overlapping bands of colour increasing the density of the vegetation, so that it was impossible to see more than a few feet between the front line of trunks.

The sky was clear and motionless, the hot sunlight shining uninterruptedly upon this magnetic shore, but now and then a stir of wind would cross the water and the trees erupted into cascades of rippling colour that lanced away into the air around us. Then, slowly, the coruscation subsided and the images of the individual trunks, each sheathed in its brilliant armour of light, reappeared, their dipping foliage loaded with deliquescing jewels.

Everyone in our craft was gaping at this spectacle, the vivid crystal light

dappling our faces and clothes, and even my bearded companion was moved by astonishment. Clasping the seat in front of him, he leaned across the rail, the white fabric of his suit transformed into a brilliant palimpsest.

Our craft moved in a wide arc towards the quay, where a score of power cruisers were being loaded by the townsfolk, and we came within some fifty yards of the prismatic jungle, the hatchwork of coloured bars across our clothes transforming us into a boatload of harlequins. There was a spontaneous round of laughter, more in relief than amusement. Then several arms pointed to the water-line, where we saw that the process had not affected the vegetation alone. Extending outwards for two or three yards from the bank were the long splinters of what appeared to be crystallizing water, the angular facets emitting a blue prismatic light washed by the wake from our craft. These splinters were growing in the water like crystals in a chemical solution, accreting more and more material to themselves, so that along the bank there was a congested mass of rhomboidal spears like the lengthening barbs of a reef.

Surprised by the extent of the phenomenon – I had expected, perhaps under the influence of the Lysenko theories, little more than an unusual plant disease, such as tobacco mosaic – I gazed up at the overhanging trees. Unmistakably each was still alive, its leaves and boughs filled with sap, and yet at the same time each was encased in a mass of crystalline tissue like an immense glacé fruit. Everywhere the branches and fronds were encrusted by the same translucent lattice, through which the sunlight was refracted into rainbows of colour.

A hubbub of speculation broke out in our craft, during which only myself and the bearded man remained silent. For some reason I suddenly felt less concerned to find a so-called 'scientific' explanation for the strange phenomenon we had seen. The beauty of the spectacle had stirred my memory, and a thousand images of childhood, forgotten for nearly forty years, now filled my mind, recalling the paradisal world of one's earliest years when everything seems illuminated by that prismatic light described so exactly by Wordsworth in his recollections of childhood. Since the death of my wife and three-year-old daughter in a car accident ten years earlier I had deliberately repressed such feelings, and the vivid magical shore before us seemed to glow like the brief spring of my marriage.

But the presence of so many soldiers and military vehicles, and the wan-faced townsfolk evacuating their homes, ensured that the little enclave of the transfigured forest – by comparison the remainder of the Everglades basin seemed a drab accumulation of peat, muck and marls – would soon be obliterated, the crystal trees dismembered and carried away to a hundred antiseptic laboratories.

At the front of the landing craft the first passengers began to debark. A hand touched my arm, and the white-suited man, apparently aware of my mood, pointed with a smile at the sleeve of his suit, as if encouraging me. To my astonishment a faint multicoloured dappling still remained,

despite the shadows of the people getting to their feet around us, as if the light from the forest had contaminated the fabric and set off the process anew. 'What on –? Wait!' I called. 'Your suit!'

But before I could speak to him he stood up and hurried down the gangway, the last pale shimmer from his suit disappearing along the crowded quay.

Our party was divided into several smaller groups, each accompanied by two NCOs, and we moved off past the queue of cars and trucks loaded with the townsfolk's possessions. The families waited their turn patiently, flagged on by the local police, eyeing us without interest. The streets were almost deserted, and these were the last people to go – the houses were empty, shutters sealed across the windows, and soldiers paced in pairs past the closed banks and stores. The sidestreets were packed with abandoned cars, confirming that the river was the only route of escape from the town.

As we walked along the main street, the glowing jungle visible two hundred yards away down the intersections on our left, a police car swerved into the street and came to a halt in front of us. Two men stepped out, a tall blond-haired police captain and a Presbyterian minister carrying a small suitcase and a parcel of books. The latter was about thirty-five, with a high scholar's forehead and tired eyes. He seemed uncertain which way to go, and waited as the police captain strode briskly around the car.

'You'll need your embarkation card, Dr Thomas.' The captain handed a coloured ticket to the minister, and then fished a set of keys attached to a mahogany peg from his pocket. 'I took these from the door. You must have left them in the lock.'

The priest hesitated, uncertain whether to take the keys. 'I left them there deliberately, captain. Someone may want to take refuge in the church.'

'I doubt it, Doctor. Wouldn't help them, anyway.' The captain waved briefly. 'See you in Miami.'

Acknowledging the salute, the priest stared at the keys in his palm, then slipped them reluctantly into his cassock. As he walked past us towards the wharf his moist eyes searched our faces with a troubled gaze, as if he suspected that a member of his congregation might be hiding in our midst.

The police captain appeared equally fatigued, and began a sharp dialogue with the officer in charge of our parties. His words were lost in the general conversation, but he pointed impatiently beyond the roof-tops with a wide sweep of one arm, as if indicating the approach of a storm. Although of strong physique, there was something weak and self-centred about his long fleshy face and pale blue eyes, and obviously his one remaining ambition, having emptied the town of its inhabitants, was to clear out at the first opportunity.

I turned to the corporal lounging by a fire hydrant and pointed to the

glowing vegetation which seemed to follow us, skirting the perimeter of the town. 'Why is everyone leaving, corporal? Surely it's not infectious – there's no danger from close contact?'

The corporal glanced laconically over his shoulder at the crystalline foliage glittering in the meridian sunlight. 'It's not infectious. Unless you stay in there too long. When it cut the road both sides of town I guess most people decided it was time to pull out.'

'Both sides?' George Schneider echoed. 'How big is the affected area, corporal? We were told three or four acres.'

The soldier shook his head dourly. 'More like three or four hundred. Or thousand, even.' He pointed to the helicopter circling the forest a mile or so away, soaring up and down over the date palms, apparently spraying them with some chemical. 'Reaches right over there, towards Lake Okeechobee.'

'But you have it under control,' George said. 'You're cutting it back all right?'

'Wouldn't like to say,' the corporal replied cryptically. He indicated the blond policeman remonstrating with the supervising officer. 'Captain Shelley tried a flame thrower on it a couple of days ago. Didn't help any.'

The policeman's objections over-ruled – he slammed the door of his car and drove off in dudgeon – we set off once more and at the next intersection approached the forest which stood back on either side of the road a quarter of a mile away. The vegetation was sparser, the sawgrass growing in clumps among the sandy soil on the verges, and a mobile laboratory had been set up in a trailer, 'U.S. Department of Agriculture' stencilled on its side. A platoon of soldiers was wandering about, taking cuttings from the palmettos and date palms, which they carefully placed like fragments of stained glass on a series of trestle tables. The main body of the forest curved around us, circling the northern perimeter of the town, and we immediately saw that the corporal had been correct in his estimate of the affected area's extent. Parallel with us one block to the north was the main Maynard–Miami highway, cut off by the glowing forest on both the eastern and western approaches to the town.

Splitting up into twos and threes, we crossed the verge and began to wander among the glacé ferns which rose from the brittle ground. The sandy surface seemed curiously hard and annealed, small spurs of fused sand protruding from the newly formed crust.

Examining the specimens collected on the tables, I touched the smooth glass-like material that sheathed the leaves and branches, following the contours of the original like a displaced image in a defective mirror. Everything appeared to have been dipped in a vat of molten glass, which had then set into a skin fractured by slender veins.

A few yards from the trailer two technicians were spinning several encrusted branches in a centrifuge. There was a continuous glimmer and sparkle as splinters of light glanced out of the bowl and vanished into the

inspection area, and as far as the perimeter fence, running like a serrated white bandage around the prismatic wound of the forest, people turned to watch.

When the centrifuge stopped we peered into the bowl, where a handful of limp branches, their blanched leaves clinging damply to the metal bottom, lay stripped of their glacé sheaths. Below the bowl, however, the liquor receptacle remained dry and empty.

Twenty yards from the forest a second helicopter prepared for take-off, its drooping blades rotating like blunted scythes, the down-draught sending up a shower of light from the disturbed vegetation. With an abrupt lurch it made a laboured ascent, swinging sideways through the air, and then moved away across the forest roof, its churning blades apparently gaining little purchase on the air. There was a confused shout of 'Fire!' from the soldiers below, and we could see clearly the vivid discharge of light which radiated from the blades like St Elmo's fire. Then, with an agonized roar like the bellow of a stricken animal, the aircraft slid backwards through the air and plunged towards the forest canopy a hundred feet below, the two pilots plainly visible at their controls. Sirens sounded from the staff cars parked around the inspection area, and there was a concerted rush towards the forest as the helicopter disappeared from sight.

As we raced along the road we felt its impact with the ground, and a sudden pulse of light drummed through the trees. The road led towards the point of the crash, a few houses looming at intervals at the ends of empty drives.

'The blades must have crystallized while it was standing near the trees,' George Schneider shouted as we climbed over the perimeter fence. 'You could see the crystals melting, like the branches in the centrifuge, but not quickly enough. Let's hope the pilots are all right.'

Several soldiers ran ahead of us, waving us back, but we ignored them and hurried on through the trees. After fifty yards we were well within the body of the forest, and had entered an enchanted world, the spanish moss investing the great oaks with brilliant jewelled trellises. The air was markedly cooler, as if everything were sheathed in ice, but a ceaseless play of radiant light poured through the stained-glass canopy overhead, turning the roof of the forest into a continuous three-dimensional kaleidoscope.

The process of crystallization was here far more advanced. The white fences along the road were so heavily encrusted that they formed an unbroken palisade, the frost at least a foot thick on either side of the palings. The few houses between the trees glistened like wedding cakes, their plain white roofs and chimneys transformed into exotic minarets and baroque domes. On a lawn of green glass spurs a child's toy, perhaps once a red tricycle with yellow wheels, glittered like a Fabergé gem, the wheels starred into brilliant jasper crowns. Lying there, it reminded me of my daughter's toys scattered on the lawn after my return from the hospital. They had glowed for a last time with the same prismatic light.

The soldiers were still ahead of me, but George and Paul Mathieu had fallen behind. Leaning against the frosted white fencing, they were plucking the soles of their shoes. By now it was obvious why the Miami–Maynard highway had been closed. The surface of the road was pierced by a continuous carpet of needles, spurs of glass and quartz as much as six inches high, reflecting the coloured light through the leaves above. The spurs tore at my shoes, forcing me to move hand over hand along the verge of the road, where a section of heavier fencing marked the approach to a distant mansion.

Behind me a siren whined, and the police car I had seen earlier plunged along the road, its heavy tyres cutting through the crystal surface. Twenty yards ahead it rocked to a halt, its engine stalled, and the police captain jumped out. With an angry shout he waved me back down the road, now a tunnel of yellow light formed by the interlocking canopies overhead.

'Get back! There's another wave coming!' He ran after the soldiers a hundred yards away, his boots crushing the crystal carpet.

Wondering why he should be so keen to clear the forest, I rested for a moment by the police car. A noticeable change had come over the forest, as if dusk had begun to fall prematurely from the sky. Everywhere the glacé sheaths which enveloped the trees and vegetation had become duller and more opaque, and the crystal floor underfoot was grey and occluded, turning the needles into spurs of basalt. The panoply of coloured light had vanished, and a dim amber gloom moved across the trees, shadowing the sequinned lawns.

Simultaneously it had become colder. Leaving the car, I started to make my way down the road – Paul Mathieu and a soldier, hands shielding their faces, were disappearing around a bend – but the icy air blocked my path like a refrigerated wall. Turning up the collar of my tropical suit, I retreated to the car, wondering whether to take refuge inside it. The cold deepened, numbing my face like a spray of acetone, and my hands felt brittle and fleshless. Somewhere I heard the hollow shout of the police captain, and caught a glimpse of someone running at full speed through the ice-grey trees.

On the right-hand side of the road the darkness completely enveloped the forest, masking the outlines of the trees, and then extended in a sudden sweep across the roadway. My eyes smarted with pain, and I brushed away the small crystals of ice which had formed over my eyeballs. Everywhere a heavy frost was forming, accelerating the process of crystallization. The spurs in the roadway were now over a foot in height, like the spines of a giant porcupine, and the lattices between the tree-trunks were thicker and more translucent, so that the original trunks seemed to shrink into a mottled thread within them. The interlocking leaves formed a continuous mosaic, the crystal elements thickening and overlaying each other. For the first time I suddenly visualized the possibility of the entire forest freezing solidly into a huge coloured glacier, with myself trapped within its interstices.

The windows of the car and the black body were now sheathed in an ice-like film. Intending to open the door so that I could switch on the heater, I reached for the handle, but my fingers were burned by the intense cold.

'You there! Come on! This way!'

Behind me, the voice echoed down the drive. As the darkness and cold deepened, I saw the police captain waving to me from the colonnade of the mansion. The lawn between us seemed to belong to a less sombre zone. The grass still retained its vivid liquid sparkle and the white eaves of the house were etched clearly against the surrounding darkness, as if this enclave were preserved like an island in the eye of a hurricane.

I ran up the drive towards the house, and with relief found that the air was at least ten degrees warmer. The sunlight shone through the leafy canopy with uninterrupted brilliance. Reaching the portico, I searched for the police captain, but he had run off into the forest again. Uncertain whether to follow him, I watched the approaching wall of darkness slowly cross the lawn, the glittering foliage overhead sinking into its pall. The police car was now encrusted by a thick layer of frozen glass, its windshield blossoming into a thousand fleur-de-lis crystals.

Quickly making my way around the house as the zone of safety moved off through the forest, I crossed the remains of an old vegetable garden, where seed-plants of green glass three feet high rose into the air like exquisite ornamented sculptures. I reached the forest again and waited there as the zone hesitated and veered off, trying to remain within the centre of its focus. I seemed to have entered a subterranean cavern, where jewelled rocks loomed from the spectral gloom like huge marine plants, the sprays of crystal sawgrass like fountains frozen in time.

For the next hour I raced helplessly through the forest, my sense of direction lost, driven by the swerving walls of the zone of safety as it twisted like a benign tornado among the trees. Several times I crossed the road, where the great spurs were almost waist high, forced to clamber over the brittle stems. Once, as I rested against the trunk of a bifurcated oak, an immense multi-coloured bird erupted from a bough over my head and flew off with a wild screech, an aureole of molten light cascading from its red and yellow wings, like the birth-flames of phoenix.

At last the strange whirlpool subsided and a pale light filtered through the stained glass canopy, transfiguring everything with its iridescence. Again the forest was a place of rainbows, the deep carmine light glowing from the jewelled grottos. I walked along a narrow road which wound towards a great white house standing like a classical pavilion on a rise in the centre of the forest. Transformed by the crystal frost, it appeared to be an intact fragment of Versailles or Fontainebleau, its ornate pilasters and sculptured friezes spilling from the wide roof which overtopped the forest. From the upper floors I would be able to see the distant water towers at Maynard, or at least trace the serpentine progress of the river.

The road narrowed, declining the slope which led up to the house,

but its annealed crust, like half-fused quartz, offered a more comfortable surface than the crystal teeth of the lawn. Suddenly I came across what was unmistakably a jewelled rowing boat sat solidly into the roadway, a chain of lapis lazuli mooring it to the verge. Then I realized that I was walking along a small tributary of the river. A thin stream of water still ran below the solid crust, and evidently this vestigial motion alone prevented it from erupting into the exotic spur-like forms of the forest floor.

As I paused by the boat, feeling the huge topaz and amethyst stones encrusted along its sides, a grotesque four-legged creature half-embedded in the surface lurched forwards through the crust, the loosened pieces of the lattice attached to its snout and shoulders shaking like a transparent cuirass. Its jaws mouthed the air silently as it struggled on its hooked legs, unable to clamber more than a few feet from the hollow trough in its own outline now filling with a thin trickle of water. Invested by the glittering sparkle of light that poured from its body, the alligator resembled some fabulous armourial beast. It lunged towards me again, and I kicked its snout, scattering the crystals which choked its mouth.

Leaving it to subside once more into a frozen posture, I climbed the bank and limped across the lawn to the mansion, whose fairy towers loomed above the trees. Although out of breath and very nearly exhausted I had a curious premonition, of intense hope and longing, as if I were some fugitive Adam chancing upon a forgotten gateway to the forbidden paradise.

From an upstairs window, the bearded man in the white suit watched me, a shot-gun under his arm.

Now that ample evidence of the Hubble Effect is available to scientific observers throughout the world, there is general agreement upon its origins and the few temporary measures that can be taken to reverse its progress. Under pressure of necessity during my flight through the phantasmagoric forests of the Everglades I had discovered the principal remedy – to remain in rapid motion – but I still assumed that some accelerated genetic mutation was responsible, even though such inanimate objects as cars and metal fencing were equally affected. However, by now even the Lysenkoists have grudgingly accepted the explanation given by workers at the Hubble Institute, that the random transfigurations throughout the world are a reflection of distant cosmic processes of enormous scope and dimensions, first glimpsed in the Andromeda spiral.

We know now that it is time ('Time with the Midas touch,' as Charles Marquand described it) which is responsible for the transformation. The recent discovery of anti-matter in the universe inevitably involves the conception of anti-time as the fourth side of this negatively charged continuum. Where anti-particle and particle collide they not only destroy their own physical identities, but their opposing time-values eliminate each other, subtracting from the universe another quantum from its total store of time. It is random discharges of this type, set off by the creation

of anti-galaxies in space, which have led to the depletion of the time-store available to the materials of our own solar system.

Just as a supersaturated solution will discharge itself into a crystalline mass, so the supersaturation of matter in a continuum of depleted time leads to its appearance in a parallel spatial matrix. As more and more time 'leaks' away, the process of supersaturation continues, the original atoms and molecules producing spatial replicas of themselves, substance without mass, in an attempt to increase their foothold upon existence. The process is theoretically without end, and eventually it is possible for a single atom to produce an infinite number of duplicates of itself and so fill the entire universe, from which simultaneously all time has expired, an ultimate macrocosmic zero beyond the wildest dreams of Plato and Democritus.

As I lay back on one of the glass-embroidered chesterfields in a bedroom upstairs, the bearded man in the white suit explained something of this to me in his sharp intermittent voice. He still stood by the open window, peering down at the lawn and the crystal stream where the alligator and the jewelled boat lay embalmed. As the broken panes annealed themselves he drove the butt of his shot-gun through them. His thin beard gave him a fevered and haunted aspect, emphasized by the white frost forming on the shoulders and lapels of his suit. For some reason he spoke to me as if to an old friend.

'It was obvious years ago, B——. Look at the viruses with their crystalline structure, neither animate nor inanimate, and their immunity to time.' He swept a hand along the sill and picked up a cluster of the vitreous grains, then scattered them across the floor like smashed marbles. 'You and I will be like them soon, and the rest of the world. Neither living nor dead!'

He broke off to raise his shot-gun, his dark eyes searching between the trees. 'We must move on,' he announced, leaving the window. 'When did you last see Captain Shelley?'

'The police captain?' I sat up weakly, my feet slipping on the floor. Several plate glass windows appeared to have been fractured and then fused together above the carpet. The ornate Persian patterns swam below the surface like the floor of some perfumed pool in the Arabian Nights. 'Just after we ran to search for the helicopter. Why are you afraid of him?'

'He's a venomous man,' he replied briefly. 'As cunning as a pig.'

We made our way down the crystal stairway. Everything in the house was covered by the same glacé sheath, embellished by exquisite curlicues and helixes. In the wide lounges the ornate Louis XV furniture had been transformed into huge pieces of opalescent candy, whose countless reflections glowed like giant chimeras in the cut-glass walls. As we disappeared through the trees towards the stream my companion shouted exultantly, as much to the forest as to myself: 'We're running out of time, B——, running out of time!'

Always he was on the look-out for the police captain. Which of them was searching for the other I could not discover, nor the subject of their blood-feud. I had volunteered my name to him, but he brushed aside the introduction. I guessed that he had sensed some spark of kinship as we sat together in the landing craft, and that he was a man who would plunge his entire sympathy or hostility upon such a chance encounter. He told me nothing of himself. Shot-gun cradled under his arm, he moved rapidly along the fossilized stream, his movements neat and deliberate, while I limped behind. Now and then we passed a jewelled power cruiser embedded in the crust, or a petrified alligator would rear upwards and grimace at us noiselessly, its crystalline skin glowing with a thousand prisms as it shifted in a fault of coloured glass.

Everywhere there was the same fantastic corona of light, transfiguring and identifying all objects. The forest was an endless labyrinth of glass caves, sealed off from the remainder of the world, (which, as far as I knew, by now might be similarly affected), lit by subterranean lamps burning below the surface of the rocks.

'Can't we get back to Maynard?' I shouted after him, my voice echoing among the vaults. 'We're going deeper into the forest.'

'The town is cut off, my dear B——. Don't worry, I'll take you there in due course.' He leapt nimbly over a fissure in the surface of the river. Below the mass of dissolving crystals a thin stream of fluid rilled down a buried channel.

For several hours, led by this strange white-suited figure with his morose preoccupied gaze, we moved through the forest, sometimes in complete circles as if my companion were familiarizing himself with the topography of that jewelled twilight world. When I sat down to rest on one of the vitrified trunks and brushed away the crystals now forming on the soles of my shoes, despite our constant movement – the air was always icy, the dark shadows perpetually closing and unfolding around us – he would wait impatiently, watching me with ruminative eyes as if deciding whether to abandon me to the forest.

At last we reached the fringes of a small clearing, bounded on three sides by the fractured dancing floor of a river bend, where a high-gabled summer house pushed its roof towards the sky through a break in the overhead canopy. From the single spire a slender web of opaque strands extended to the surrounding trees like a diaphanous veil, investing the glass garden and the crystalline summer house with a pale marble sheen, almost sepulchral in its intensity. As if reinforcing this impression, the windows on to the veranda running around the house were now encrusted with elaborate scroll-like designs, like the ornamented stone casements of a tomb.

Waving me back, my companion approached the fringes of the garden, his shot-gun raised before him. He darted from tree to tree, pausing for any sign of movement, then crossed the frozen surface of the river with a feline step. High above him, its wings pinioned by the glass canopy, a

golden oriole flexed slowly in the afternoon light, liquid ripples of its aura circling outwards like the rays of a miniature sun.

'Marquand!'

A shot roared into the clearing, its report echoing around the glass trees, and the blond-haired police captain raced towards the summer house, a revolver in his hand. As he fired again the crystal trellises of the spanish moss shattered and frosted, collapsing around me like a house of mirrors. Leaping down from the veranda, the bearded man made off like a hare across the river, bent almost double as he darted over the faults in the surface.

The rapidity with which all this had happened left me standing helplessly by the edge of the clearing, my ears ringing with the two explosions. I searched the forest for any signs of my companion, and then the police captain, standing on the veranda, gestured me towards him with his pistol.

'Come here!' When I tentatively approached he came down the steps, scrutinizing me suspiciously. 'What are you doing around here? Aren't you one of the visiting party?'

I explained that I had been trapped after the crash of the helicopter. 'Can you take me back to the army post? I've been wandering around the forest all day.'

A morose frown twisted his long face. 'The Army's a long way off. The forest's changing all the time.' He pointed across the river. 'What about Marquand? Where did you meet him?'

'The bearded man? He was taking shelter in a house near the river. Why did you shoot at him? Is he a criminal?'

Shelley nodded after a pause. His manner was somehow furtive and shifty. 'Worse than that. He's a madman, completely crazy.' He started to walk up the steps, apparently prepared to let me make my own way into the forest. 'You'd better be careful, there's no knowing what the forest is going to do. Keep moving but circle around on yourself, or you'll get lost.'

'Wait a minute!' I called after him. 'Can't I rest here? I need a map – perhaps you have a spare one?'

'A map? What good's a map now?' He hesitated as my arms fell limply to my sides. 'All right, you can come in for five minutes.' This concession to humanity was obviously torn from him.

The summer house consisted of a single circular room and a small kitchen at the rear. Heavy shutters had been placed against the windows, now locked to the casements by the interstitial crystals, and the only light entered through the door.

Shelley holstered his pistol and turned the door handle gently. Through the frosted panes were the dim outlines of a high four-poster bed, presumably stolen from one of the nearby mansions. Gilded cupids played about the mahogany canopy, pipes to their lips, and four naked caryatids with upraised arms formed the corner posts.

'Mrs Shelley,' the captain explained in a low voice. 'She's not too well.'

For a moment we gazed down at the occupant of the bed, who lay back on a large satin bolster, a febrile hand on the silk counterpane. At first I thought I was looking at an elderly woman, probably the captain's mother, and then realized that in fact she was little more than a child, a young woman in her early twenties. Her long platinum hair lay like a white shawl over her shoulders, her thin high-cheeked face raised to the scanty light. Once she might have had a nervous porcelain beauty, but her wasted skin and the fading glow of light in her half-closed eyes gave her the appearance of someone preternaturally aged, reminding me of my own wife in the last minutes before her death.

'Shelley.' Her voice cracked faintly in the amber gloom. 'Shelley, it's getting cold again. Can't you light a fire?'

'The wood won't burn, Emerelda. It's all turned into glass.' The captain stood at the foot of the bed, his peaked hat held in his hands, peering down solicitously as if he were on duty. He unzipped his leather jacket. 'I brought you these. They'll help you.'

He leaned forwards, hiding something from me, and spilled several handfuls of red and blue gem-stones across the counterpane. Rubies and sapphires of many sizes, they glittered in the thin light with a feverish heat.

'Shelley, thank you . . .' The girl's free hand scuttled across the counterpane to the stones. Her child-like face had become almost vulpine with greed. Seizing a handful, she brought them up to her neck and pressed them tightly against her skin, where the bruises formed like fingerprints. Their contact seemed to revive her and she stirred slowly, several of the jewels slipping to the floor.

'What were you shooting at, Shelley?' she asked after an interval. 'There was a gun going off, it gave me a headache.'

'Just an alligator, Emerelda. There are some smart alligators around here, I have to watch them. You get some rest now.'

'But, Shelley, I need more of these, you only brought me a few today . . .' Her hand, like a claw, searched the counterpane. Then she turned away from us and seemed to subside into sleep, the jewels lying like scarabs on the white skin of her breast.

Captain Shelley nudged me and we stepped quietly into the kitchen. The small cubicle was almost empty, a disconnected refrigerator standing on the cold stove. Shelley opened the door and began to empty the remainder of the jewels on to the shelves, where they lay like cherries among the half-dozen cans. A light frost covered the enamel exterior of the refrigerator, as everything else in the kitchen, but the inner walls remained unaffected.

'Who is she?' I asked as Shelley prised the lid off a can. 'Shouldn't you try to get her away from here?'

Shelley stared at me with his ambiguous expression. He seemed always

to be concealing something, his blue eyes fractionally lowered from my own. 'She's my wife,' he said with a curious emphasis, as if unsure of the fact. 'Emerelda. She's safer here, as long as I watch out for Marquand.'

'Why should he want to hurt her? He seemed sane enough to me.'

'He's a maniac!' Shelley said with sudden force. 'He spent six months in a strait-jacket. He wants to take Emerelda and live in his crazy house in the middle of the swamp.' As an afterthought, he added: 'She was married to Marquand.'

As we ate, forking the cold meat straight from the can, he told me of the strange melancholy architect, Charles Foster Marquand, who had designed several of the largest hotels in Miami and then two years earlier abruptly abandoned his work in disgust. He had married Emerelda, after bribing her parents, within a few hours of seeing her in an amusement park, and then carried her away to a grotesque folly he had built among the sharks and alligators in the swamp. According to Shelley he never spoke to Emerelda after the marriage ceremony, and prevented her from leaving the house or seeing anyone except a blind negro servant. Apparently he saw his bride in a sort of Pre-Raphaelite dream, caged within his house like the lost spirit of his imagination. When she finally escaped, with Captain Shelley's assistance, he had gone berserk and spent some time as a voluntary patient at an asylum. Now he had returned with the sole ambition of returning with Emerelda to his house in the swamps, and Shelley was convinced, perhaps sincerely, that his morbid and lunatic presence was responsible for Emerelda's lingering malaise.

At dusk I left them, barricaded together in the white sepulchre of the summer house, and set off in the direction of the river which Shelley said was half a mile away, hoping to follow it to Maynard. With luck an army unit would be stationed at the nearest margins of the affected zone, and the soldiers would be able to retrace my steps and rescue the police captain and his dying wife.

Shelley's lack of hospitality did not surprise me. In turning me out into the forest he was using me as a decoy, confident that Marquand would immediately try to reach me for news of his former wife. As I made my way through the dark crystal grottos I listened for his footsteps, but the glass sheaths of the trees sung and crackled with a thousand voices as the forest cooled in the darkness. Above, through the lattices between the trees, I could see the great fractured bowl of the moon. Around me, in the vitreous walls, the reflected stars glittered like myriads of fireflies.

At this time I noticed that my own clothes had begun to glow in the dark, the fine frost that covered my suit spangled by the starlight. Spurs of crystal grew from the dial of my wristwatch, imprisoning the hands within a medallion of moonstone.

At midnight I reached the river, a causeway of frozen gas that might have soared high across the Milky Way. Forced to leave it when the surface broke into a succession of giant cataracts, I approached the outskirts of Maynard, passing the mobile laboratory used by the Department of

Agriculture. The trailer, and the tables and the equipment scattered around it had been enveloped by the intense frost, and the branches in the centrifuge had blossomed again into brilliant jewelled sprays. I picked up a discarded helmet, now a glass porcupine, and drove it through a window of the trailer.

In the darkness the white-roofed houses of the town gleamed like the funerary temples of a necropolis, their cornices ornamented with countless spires and gargoyles, linked together across the roads by the expanding tracery. A frozen wind moved through the streets, which were waist-high forests of fossil spurs, the abandoned cars embedded within them like armoured saurians on an ancient ocean floor.

Everywhere the process of transformation was accelerating. My feet were encased in huge crystal slippers. It was these long spurs which enabled me to walk along the street, but soon they would fuse together and lock me to the ground.

The eastern entrance to the town was sealed by the forest and the erupting roadway. Limping westwards again, in the hope of returning to Captain Shelley, I passed a small section of the sidewalk that remained clear of all growth, below the broken window of a jewellery store. Handfuls of looted stones were scattered across the pavement, ruby and emerald rings, topaz brooches and pendants, intermingled with countless smaller stones and industrial diamonds that glittered coldly in the starlight.

As I stood among the stones I noticed that the crystal outgrowths from my shoes were dissolving and melting, like icicles exposed to sudden heat. Pieces of the crust fell away and slowly deliquesced, vanishing without trace into the air.

Then I realized why Captain Shelley had brought the jewels to his wife, and why she had seized upon them so eagerly. By some optical or electromagnetic freak, the intense focus of light within the stones simultaneously produced a compression of time, so that the discharge of light from the surfaces reversed the process of crystallization. (Perhaps it is this gift of time which accounts for the eternal appeal of precious gems, as well as of all baroque painting and architecture? Their intricate crests and cartouches, occupying more than their own volume of space, so contain a greater ambient time, providing that unmistakable premonition of immortality sensed within St Peter's or the palace at Nymphenburg. By contrast the architecture of the 20th century, characteristically one of rectangular unornamented facades, of simple Euclidean space and time, is that of the New World, confident of its firm footing in the future and indifferent to those pangs of mortality which haunt the mind of old Europe.)

Quickly I knelt down and filled my pockets with the stones, cramming them into my shirt and cuffs. I sat back against the store front, the semi-circle of smooth pavement like a miniature patio, at whose edges the crystal undergrowth glittered like a spectral garden. Pressed to my cold skin, the hard faces of the jewels seemed to warm me, and within a few seconds I fell into an exhausted sleep.

* * *

I woke into brilliant sunshine in a street of temples, a thousand rainbows spangling the gilded air with a blaze of prismatic colours. Shielding my eyes, I lay back and looked up at the roof-tops, their gold tiles apparently inlaid with thousands of coloured gems, like the temple quarter of Bangkok.

A hand pulled roughly at my shoulder. Trying to sit up, I found that the semicircle of clear sidewalk had vanished, and my body lay sprawled on a bed of sprouting needles. The growth had been most rapid in the entrance to the store, and my right arm was encased in a mass of crystalline spurs, three or four inches long, that reached almost to my shoulder. My hand was sheathed in a huge frozen gauntlet of prismatic crystals, almost too heavy to lift, my fingers outlined by a rainbow of colours.

Overwhelmed by panic, I managed to drag myself on to my knees, and found the bearded man in the white suit crouching behind me, his shot-gun in his hands.

'Marquand!' With a cry, I raised my jewelled arm. 'For God's sake!'

My voice distracted him from his scrutiny of the light-filled street. His lean face with its small bright eyes was transfigured by strange colours that mottled his skin and drew out the livid blues and violets of his beard. His suit radiated a thousand bands of colour.

He moved towards me but before he could speak there was a roar of gunfire and the glass sheet encrusted to the doorway shattered into a shower of crystals. Marquand flinched and hid behind me, then pulled me backwards through the window. As another shot was fired down the street we stumbled past the looted counters into an office where the door of a safe stood open on to a jumble of metal cash boxes. Marquand snapped back the lids on to the empty trays, and then began to scoop together the few jewels scattered across the floor.

Stuffing them into my empty pockets, he pulled me through a window into the rear alley, and from there into the adjacent street, transformed by the overhead lattices into a tunnel of crimson and vermilion light. We stopped at the first turning, and he beckoned to the glistening forest fifty yards away.

'Run, run! Anywhere through the forest, it's all you can do!'

He pushed me forwards with the butt of his shot-gun, whose breach was now encrusted by a mass of silver crystals, like a medieval flintlock. I raised my arm helplessly. In the sunlight the jewelled spurs coruscated like a swarm of coloured fireflies. 'My arm, Marquand! It's reached my shoulder!'

'Run! Nothing else can help you!' His illuminated face flickered angrily. 'Don't waste the stones, they won't last you for ever!'

Forcing myself to run, I set off towards the forest, where I entered the first of the caves of light. I whirled my arm like a clumsy propeller, and felt the crystals recede slightly. By luck I soon reached a tributary of the river, and hurled myself like a wild man along its petrified surface.

For many hours, or days, I raced through the forest I can no longer remember, for all sense of time deserted me. If I stopped for more than a minute the crystal bands would seize my neck and shoulder, and I ran past the trees for hour after hour, only pausing when I slumped exhausted on the glass beaches. Then I pressed the jewels to my face, warding off the glacé sheath. But their power slowly faded, and as their facets blunted they turned into nodes of unpolished silica.

Once, as I ran through the darkness, my arm whirling before me, I passed the summer house where Captain Shelley kept guard over his dying wife, and heard him fire at me from the veranda.

At last, late one afternoon, when the deepening ruby light of dusk settled through the forest, I entered a small clearing where the deep sounds of an organ reverberated among the trees. In the centre was a small church, its gilt spire fused to the surrounding trees.

Raising my jewelled arm, I drove back the oak doors and entered the nave. Above me, refracted by the stained glass windows, a brilliant glow of light poured down upon the altar. Listening to the surging music, I leaned against the altar rail and extended my arm to the gold cross set with rubies and emeralds. Immediately the sheath slipped and dissolved like a melting sleeve of ice. As the crystals deliquesced the light poured from my arm like an overflowing fountain.

Turning his head to watch me, the priest sat at the organ, his firm hands drawing from the pipes their great unbroken music, which soared away, interweaved by countless overtones, through the panels of the windows towards the dismembered sun.

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of eternity.

For the next week I stayed with him, as the last crystal spurs dissolved from the tissues of my arm. All day I knelt beside him, working the bellows of the organ with my arm as the Pelestrina and Bach echoed around us. At dusk, when the sun sank in a thousand fragments into the western night, he would break off and stand on the porch, looking out at the spectral trees.

I remembered him as Dr Thomas, the priest Captain Shelley had driven to the harbour. His slim scholar's face and calm eyes, their serenity belied by the nervous movements of his hands, like the false calm of someone recovering from an attack of fever, would gaze at me as we ate our small supper on a foot-stool beside the altar, sheltered from the cold all-embalming wind by the jewels in the cross. At first I thought he regarded my survival as an example of the Almighty's intervention, and I made some token expression of gratitude. At this he smiled ambiguously.

Why he had returned I did not try to guess. By now his church was surrounded on all sides by the crystal trellises, as if overtopped by the mouth of an immense glacier.

One morning he found a blind snake, its eyes transformed into enormous jewels, searching hesitantly at the door of the porch, and carried it in his hands to the altar. He watched it with a wry smile when, its sight returned, it slid away noiselessly among the pews.

On another day I woke to the early morning light and found him, alone, celebrating the Eucharist. He stopped, half-embarrassed, and over breakfast confided: 'You probably wonder what I was doing, but it seemed an appropriate moment to test the validity of the sacrament.' He gestured at the prismatic colours pouring through the stained glass windows, whose original scriptural scenes had been transformed into paintings of bewildering abstract beauty. 'It may sound heretical to say so, but the body of Christ is with us everywhere here – in each prism and rainbow, in the ten thousand faces of the sun.' He raised his thin hands, jewelled by the light. 'So you see, I fear that the church, like its symbol –' here he pointed to the cross '– may have outlived its function.'

I searched for an answer. 'I'm sorry. Perhaps if you left here –'

'No!' he insisted, annoyed by my obtuseness. 'Can't you understand? Once I was a true apostate – I knew God existed but could not believe in him. Now,' he laughed bitterly, 'events have overtaken me.'

With a gesture he led me down the nave to the open porch, and pointed up to the dome-shaped lattice of crystal beams which reached from the rim of the forest like the buttresses of an immense cupola of diamond and glass. Embedded at various points were the almost motionless forms of birds with outstretched wings, golden orioles and scarlet macaws, shedding brilliant pools of light. The bands of liquid colour rippled outwards through the forest, the reflections of the melting plumage enveloping us in endless concentric patterns. The overlapping arcs hung in the air like the votive windows of a city of cathedrals. Everywhere around us I could see countless smaller birds, butterflies and insects, joining their miniature haloes to the coronation of the forest.

He took my arm. 'Here in this forest everything is transfigured and illuminated, joined together in the last marriage of time and space.'

Towards the end, when we stood side by side with our backs to the altar, as the aisle transformed itself into an occluding tunnel of glass pillars, his conviction seemed to fail him. With an expression almost of panic he watched the keys of the organ manuals frosting like the coins of a bursting coffer, and I knew that he was searching for some means of escape.

Then at last he rallied, seized the cross from the altar and pressed it into my arms, with a sudden anger born of absolute certainty dragged me roughly to the porch and propelled me to one of the narrowing vaults.

'Go! Get away from here! Find the river!'

When I hesitated, the heavy sceptre weighing upon my arms, he shouted fiercely: 'Tell them I ordered you to take it!'

I last saw him standing arms outstretched to the approaching walls, in

the posture of the illuminated birds, his eyes filled with wonder and relief at the first circles of light conjured from his upraised palms.

Struggling with the huge golden incubus of the cross, I made my way towards the river, my tottering figure reflected in the hanging mirrors of the spanish moss like a lost Simon of Cyrene pictured in a medieval manuscript.

I was still sheltering behind it when I reached Captain Shelley's summer house. The door was open, and I looked down at the bed in the centre of a huge fractured jewel, in whose frosted depths, like swimmers asleep on the bottom of an enchanted pool, Emerelda and her husband lay together. The Captain's eyes were closed, and the delicate petals of a blood-red rose blossomed from the hole in his breast like an exquisite marine plant. Beside him Emerelda slept serenely, the unseen motion of her heart sheathing her body in a faint amber glow, the palest residue of life.

Something glittered in the dusk behind me. I turned to see a brilliant chimera, a man with incandescent arms and chest, race past among the trees, a cascade of particles diffusing in the air behind him. I flinched back behind the cross, but he vanished as suddenly as he had appeared, whirling himself away among the crystal vaults. As his luminous wake faded I heard his voice echoing across the frosted air, the plaintive words jewelled and ornamented like everything else in that transmogrified world.

'Emerelda . . . ! Emerelda . . . !'

Here on this calm island of Puerto Rico, in the garden of the British Embassy these few months later, the strange events of that phantasmagoric forest seem a dozen worlds away. Yet in fact I am no more than 1,000 miles from Florida as the crow (or should I say, the gryphon) flies, and already there have been numerous other outbreaks at many times this distance from the three focal areas. Somewhere I have seen a report that at the present rate of progress at least a third of the earth's surface will be affected by the end of the next decade, and a score of the world's capital cities petrified beneath layers of prismatic crystal, as Miami has already been – some reporters have described the abandoned resort as a city of a thousand cathedral spires, like a vision of St John the Divine.

To tell the truth, however, the prospect causes me little worry. It is obvious to me now that the origins of the Hubble Effect are more than physical. When I stumbled out of the forest into an army cordon ten miles from Maynard two days after seeing the helpless phantom that had once been Charles Marquand, the gold cross clutched in my arms, I was determined never to visit the Everglades again. By one of those ludicrous inversions of logic, I found myself, far from acclaimed as a hero, standing summary trial before a military court and charged with looting. The gold cross had apparently been stripped of its jewels, and in vain did I protest that these vanished stones had been the price of my survival. At last I was rescued by the embassy in Washington under the

plea of diplomatic immunity, but my suggestion that a patrol equipped with jewelled crosses should enter the forest and attempt to save the priest and Charles Marquand met with little success. Despite my protests I was sent to San Juan to recuperate.

The intention of my superiors was that I should be cut off from all memory of my experience – perhaps they sensed some small but significant change in me. Each night, however, the fractured disc of the Echo satellite passes overhead, illuminating the midnight sky like a silver chandelier. And I am convinced that the sun itself has begun to effloresce. At sunset, when its disc is veiled by the crimson dust, it seems to be crossed by a distinctive latticework, a vast portcullis which will one day spread outwards to the planets and the stars, halting them in their courses.

I know now that I shall return to the Everglades. As the example of that brave apostate priest who gave the cross to me illustrates, there is an immense reward to be found in that frozen forest. There in the Everglades the transfiguration of all living and inanimate forms occurs before our eyes, the gift of immortality a direct consequence of the surrender by each of us of our own physical and temporal identity. However apostate we may be in this world, there perforce we become apostles of the prismatic sun.

So, when my convalescence is complete and I return to Washington, I shall seize an opportunity to visit the Florida peninsula again with one of the many scientific expeditions. It should not be too difficult to arrange my escape and then I shall return to the solitary church in that enchanted world, where by day fantastic birds fly through the petrified forest and jewelled alligators glitter like heraldic salamanders on the banks of the crystalline rivers, and where by night the illuminated man races among the trees, his arms like golden cartwheels and his head like a spectral crown.

1964

THE DELTA AT SUNSET

Each evening, when the dense powdery dusk lay over the creeks and drained mud-basins of the delta, the snakes would come out on to the beaches. Half-asleep on the wicker stretcher-chair below the awning of his tent, Charles Gifford watched their sinuous forms coiling and uncoiling as they wound their way up the slopes. In the opaque blue light the dusk swept like a fading searchlight over the damp beaches, and the interlocked bodies shone with an almost phosphorescent brilliance.

The nearest creeks were three hundred yards from the camp, but for some reason the appearance of the snakes always coincided with Gifford's recovery from his evening fever. As this receded, carrying with it the familiar diorama of reptilian phantoms, he would sit up in the stretcher-chair and find the snakes crawling across the beaches, almost as if they had materialized from his dreams. Involuntarily he would search the sand around the tent for any signs of their damp skins.

'The strange thing is they always come out at the same time,' Gifford said to the Indian head-boy who had emerged from the mess tent and was now covering him with a blanket. 'One minute there's nothing there, and the next thousands of them are swarming all over the mud.'

'You not cold, sir?' the Indian asked.

'Look at them now, before the light goes. It's really fantastic. There must be a sharply defined threshold –' He tried to lift his pale, bearded face above the hillock formed by the surgical cradle over his foot, and snapped: 'All right, all right!'

'Doctor?' The head-boy, a thirty-year-old Indian named Mechippe, continued to straighten the cradle, his limpid eyes, set in a face of veined and weathered teak, watching Gifford.

'I said get out of the damned way!' Leaning weakly on one elbow, Gifford watched the last light fade across the winding causeways of the delta, taking with it a final image of the snakes. Each evening, as the heat mounted with the advancing summer, they came out in greater numbers, as if aware of the lengthening periods of his fever.

'Sir, I get more blanket for you?'

'No, for God's sake.' Gifford's thin shoulders shivered in the dusk air, but he ignored the discomfort. He looked down at his inert, corpse-like body below the blanket, examining it with far more detachment than he had felt for the unknown Indians dying in the makeshift WHO

field hospital at Taxcol. At least there was a passive repose about the Indians, a sense of the still intact integrity of flesh and spirit, if anything reinforced by the failure of one of the partners. It was this paradigm of fatalism which Gifford would have liked to achieve – even the most wretched native, identifying himself with the irrevocable flux of nature, had bridged a greater span of years than the longest-lived European or American with his obsessive time-consciousness, cramming so-called significant experiences into his life like a glutton. By contrast, Gifford realized, he himself had merely thrown aside his own body, divorcing it like some no longer useful partner in a functional business marriage. So marked a lack of loyalty depressed him.

He tapped his bony loins. 'It's not this, Mechippe, that ties us to mortality, but our confounded egos.' He smiled slyly at the head-boy. 'Louise would appreciate that, don't you think?'

The head-boy was watching a refuse fire being raised behind the mess tent. He looked down sharply at the supine figure on the stretcher-chair, his half-savage eyes glinting like arrow heads in the oily light of the burning brush. 'Sir? You want –?'

'Forget it,' Gifford told him. 'Bring two whisky sodas. And some more chairs. Where's Mrs Gifford?'

He glanced up at Mechippe when he failed to reply. Briefly their eyes met, in an instant of absolute clarity. Fifteen years earlier, when Gifford had come to the delta with his first archaeological expedition, Mechippe had been one of the junior camp-followers. Now he was in the late middle age of the Indian, the notches on his cheeks lost in the deep hatchwork of lines and scars, wise in the tent-lore of the visitors.

'Miss' Gifford – resting,' he said cryptically. In an attempt to alter the tempo and direction of their dialogue, he added: 'I tell Mr Lowry, then bring whiskies and hot towel, Doctor.'

'Okay, Mechippe.' Lying back with an ironic smile, Gifford listened to the head-boy's footsteps move away softly through the sand. The muted sounds of the camp stirred around him – the cooling plash of water in the shower stall, the soft interchanges of the Indians, the whining of a desert dog waiting to approach the refuse dump – and he sank downwards into the thin tired body stretched out in front of him like a collection of bones in a carpet bag, rekindling the fading senses of touch and pressure in his limbs.

In the moonlight, the white beaches of the delta glistened like banks of luminous chalk, the snakes festering on the slope like the worshippers of a midnight sun.

Half an hour later they drank their whiskies together in the dark tinted air. Revived by Mechippe's massage, Charles Gifford sat upright in the stretcher-chair, gesturing with his glass. The whisky had momentarily cleared his brain; usually he was reluctant to discuss the snakes in his wife's presence, let alone Lowry's, but the marked increase in their

numbers seemed important enough to mention. There was also the mildly malicious pleasure – less amusing now than it had been – of seeing Louise shudder at any mention of the snakes.

'What is so unusual,' he explained, 'is the way they emerge on to the banks at the same time. There must be a precise level of luminosity, an exact number of photons, to which they all respond – presumably an innate trigger.'

Dr Richard Lowry, Gifford's assistant and since his accident the acting leader of the expedition, watched Gifford uncomfortably from the edge of his canvas chair, rotating his glass below his long nose. He had been placed downwind from the loose bandages swaddling Gifford's foot (little revenges of this kind, however childish, alone sustained Gifford's interest in the people around him), and carefully averted his face as he asked: 'But why the sudden increase in numbers? A month ago there was barely a snake in sight?'

'Dick, *please*!' Louise Gifford turned an expression of martyred weariness on Lowry. 'Must we?'

'There's an obvious answer,' Gifford said to Lowry. 'During the summer the delta drains, and begins to look like the half-empty lagoons that were here 50 million years ago. The giant amphibians had died out, and the small reptiles were the dominant species. These snakes are probably carrying around what is virtually a coded internal landscape, a picture of the Paleocene as sharp as our own memories of New York and London.' He turned to his wife, the shadows cast by the distant refuse fire hollowing his cheeks. 'What's the matter, Louise? Don't say you can't remember New York and London?'

'I don't know whether I can or not.' She pushed a lock of fraying blonde hair off her forehead. 'I wish you wouldn't think about the snakes all the time.'

'Well, I'm beginning to understand them. I was always baffled by the way they'd appear at the same time. Besides, there's nothing else to do. I don't want to sit here staring at that damned Toltec ruin of yours.'

He gestured towards the low ridge of sandstone, its profile illuminated against the white moonlit clouds, which marked the margins of the alluvial bench half a mile from the camp. Before Gifford's accident their chairs had faced the ruined terrace city emerging from the thistles which covered the ridge. But Gifford had tired of staring all day at the crumbling galleries and colonnades where his wife and Lowry worked together. He told Mechippe to dismantle the tent and turn it through ninety degrees, so that he could watch the last light of the sunset fading over the western delta. The burning refuse fires they now faced provided at least a few wisps of motion. Gazing for hours across the endless creeks and mud-banks, whose winding outlines became more and more serpentine as the summer drought persisted and the level of the water table fell, he had one evening discovered the snakes.

'Surely it's simply a shortage of dissolved oxygen,' Lowry commented.

He noticed Gifford regarding him with an expression of critical distaste, and added: 'Jung believes the snake is primarily a symbol of the unconscious, and that its appearance always heralds a crisis in the psyche.'

'I suppose I accept that,' Charles Gifford said. With rather forced laughter he added, shaking his foot in the cradle: 'I have to. Don't I, Louise?' Before his wife, who was watching the fires with a distracted expression, could reply he went on: 'Though in fact I disagree with Jung. For me the snake is a symbol of transformation. Every evening at sunset the great lagoons of the Paleocene are re-created here, not only for the snakes but for you and I too, if we care to look. Not for nothing is the snake a symbol of wisdom.'

Richard Lowry frowned doubtfully into his glass. 'I'm not convinced, sir. It was primitive man who had to assimilate events in the external world to his own psyche.'

'Absolutely right,' Gifford rejoined. 'How else is nature meaningful, unless she illustrates some inner experience? The only real landscapes are the internal ones, or the external projections of them, such as this delta.' He passed his empty glass to his wife. 'Agree, Louise? Though perhaps you take a Freudian view of the snakes?'

This thin jibe, uttered with the cold humour which had become characteristic of Gifford, brought their conversation to a halt. Restlessly, Lowry looked at his watch, eager to be away from Gifford and his pathetic boorishness. Gifford, a cold smirk on his lips, waited for Lowry to catch his eye; by a curious paradox his dislike of his assistant was encouraged by the latter's reluctance to retaliate, rather than by the still ambiguous but crystallizing relationship between Lowry and Louise. Lowry's meticulous neutrality and good manners seemed to Gifford an attempt to preserve a world on which Gifford had turned his back, that world where there were no snakes on the beaches and where events moved on a single plane of time like the blurred projection of a three-dimensional object by a defective camera obscura.

Lowry's politeness was also, of course, an attempt to shield himself and Louise from Gifford's waspish tongue. Like Hamlet taking advantage of his madness to insult and cross-examine anyone at will, Gifford often used the exhausted half-lucid interval after his fever subsided to make his more pointed comments. As he emerged from the penumbral shallows, the looming figures of his wife and assistant still surrounded by the rotating mandalas he saw in his dreams, he would give full rein to his tortured humour. That in this way he was helping his wife and Lowry towards an inevitable climax only encouraged Gifford.

His long farewell to Louise, protracted now for so many years, at last seemed feasible, even if only part of the greater goodbye, the vast leave-taking that Gifford was about to embark upon. The fifteen years of their marriage had been little more than a single frustrated farewell, a search for a means to an end which their own strengths of character had always prevented.

Looking up at Louise's sun-grazed but still handsome profile, at her fading blonde hair swept back off her angular shoulders, Gifford realized that his dislike of her was in no way personal, but merely part of the cordial distaste he felt for almost the entire human race. And even this deeply ingrained misanthropy was only a reflection of his own undying self-contempt. If there were few people whom he had ever liked, there were, equally, few moments during which he had ever liked himself. His entire life as an archaeologist, from his early adolescence when he had first collected fossil ammonites from a nearby limestone outcropping, was an explicit attempt to return to the past and discover the sources of his self-loathing.

'Do you think they'll send an aeroplane?' Louise asked after breakfast the next morning. 'There was a noise then . . .'

'I doubt it,' Lowry said. He gazed up at the empty sky. 'We didn't ask for one. The landing field at Taxcol is disused. During the summer the harbour drains and everyone moves up-coast.'

'There'll be a doctor, surely? Not everyone will have gone?'

'Yes, there's a doctor. There's one permanently attached to the port authority.'

'A drunken fool,' Gifford interjected. 'I refuse to let him touch me with his poxy hands. Forget about the doctor, Louise. Even if someone is prepared to come out here, how do you think he'll manage it?'

'But Charles –'

Gifford gestured irritably at the glistening mudbanks. 'The whole delta is draining like a dirty bath, no one is going to risk a stiff dose of malaria just to put a splint on my ankle. Anyway, that boy Mechippe sent is probably still hanging around here somewhere.'

'But Mechippe insisted he was reliable.' Louise looked down helplessly at her husband propped against the back of the stretcher-chair. 'Dick, I wish you could have gone with him. It's only fifty miles. You would have been there by now.'

Lowry nodded uneasily. 'Well, I didn't think . . . I'm sure everything will be all right. How is the leg, sir?'

'Just dandy.' Gifford had been staring out across the delta. He noticed Lowry peering down at him with a long puckered face. 'What's the matter, Richard? Does the smell offend you?' Suddenly exasperated, he snapped: 'Do me a favour and take a walk, dear chap.'

'What –?' Lowry stared at him uncertainly. 'Of course, Doctor.'

Gifford watched Lowry's neatly groomed figure walk away stiffly among the tents. 'He's awfully correct, isn't he? But he doesn't know how to take an insult yet. I'll see that he gets plenty of practice.'

Louise slowly shook her head. 'Do you have to, Charles? Without him we'd be in rather a spot, you know. I don't think you're being very fair.'

'*Fair*?' Gifford repeated the word with a grimace. 'What are you talking about? For God's sake, Louise.'

'All right then,' his wife replied patiently. 'I don't think you should blame Richard for what's happened.'

'I don't. Is that what your dear Dick suggests? Now that this thing is beginning to smell he's trying to throw his guilt back on to me.'

'He is not –'

Gifford petulantly thumped the wicker elbow rest. 'He damned well is!' He gazed up darkly at his wife, his thin twisted mouth framed by the rim of beard. 'Don't worry, my dear, you will too by the time this thing is finished.'

'Charles, please . . .'

'Who cares, anyway?' Gifford lay back weakly for a moment, and then, as he recovered, a curious feeling of light-headed and almost euphoric calm coming over him, began again: 'Dr Richard Lowry. How he loves his doctorate. I wouldn't have had the nerve at his age. A third-rate PhD for work that I did for him, and he styles himself "Doctor".'

'So do you.'

'Don't be a fool. I can remember when at least two Chairs were offered to me.'

'But you couldn't degrade yourself by accepting them,' his wife commented, a trace of irony in her voice.

'No, I could not,' Gifford attested vehemently. 'Do you know what Cambridge is like, Louise? It's *packed* with Richard Lowrys! Besides, I had a far better idea. I married a rich wife. She was charming, beautiful, and in a slightly ambiguous way respected my moody brilliance, but above all she was rich.'

'How pleasant for you.'

'People who marry for money earn it. I really earned mine.'

'Thank you, Charles.'

Gifford chuckled to himself. 'One thing, Louise, you do know how to take an insult. It's a matter of breeding. I'm surprised you aren't more choosy over Lowry.'

'Choosy?' Louise laughed awkwardly. 'I hadn't realized that I'd chosen him. I think Richard is very obliging and helpful – as you knew when you made him your assistant, by the way.'

Gifford began to compose his reply, when a sudden chill enveloped his chest and shoulders. He pulled weakly at the blanket, an immense feeling of fatigue and inertia overtaking him. He looked up glassily at his wife, their bickering conversation forgotten. The sunlight had vanished, and a profound darkness lay over the face of the delta, illuminated for a brief interval by the seething outlines of thousands of snakes. Trying to capture the image in his eyes, he struggled forward against the incubus pressing upon his chest, and then slid backwards into a pit of nausea and giddiness. 'Louise . . . !'

Quickly his wife's hands were on his own, her shoulder supporting his head. He vomited emptily, struggling with his contracting musculature like a snake trying to shed its skin. Dimly he heard his wife

shout for someone and the cradle topple to the ground, dragging the bedclothes with it.

'Louise,' he whispered, 'one of these nights . . . I want you to take me down to the snakes.'

Now and then, during the afternoon, when the pain in his foot became acute, he would wake to find Louise sitting beside him. All the while he moved through ceaseless dreams, sinking from one plane of reverie to the next, the great mandalas guiding him downwards, enthroning him upon their luminous dials.

During the next few days the conversations with his wife were less frequent. As his condition deteriorated, Gifford felt able to do little more than stare out across the mud-flats, almost unaware of the movement and arguments around him. His wife and Mechippe formed a tenuous bridge with reality, but the true centre of his attention was the nexus of beaches on to which the snakes emerged in the evenings. This was a zone of complete timelessness, where at last he sensed the simultaneity of all time, the coexistence of all events in his past life.

The snakes now made their appearance half an hour earlier. Once he caught a glimpse of their motionless albino forms exposed on the slopes in the hot noon air. Their chalk-white skins and raised heads, in a reclining posture very like his own, made them seem immeasurably ancient, like the white sphinxes in the funeral corridors to the pharaonic tombs at Karnak.

Although his strength had ebbed markedly, the infection on his foot had spread only a few inches above the ankle, and Louise Gifford realized that her husband's deterioration was a symptom of a profound psychological malaise, the *mal de passage* induced by the potently atmospheric landscape and its evocation of the lagoon-world of the Paleocene. She suggested to Gifford during one of his lucid intervals that they move the camp half a mile across the plain into the shadow of the ridge, near the Toltec terrace city where she and Lowry carried out their archaeological work.

But Gifford had refused, reluctant to leave the snakes on the beach. For some reason he disliked the terrace city. This was not because it was there that he had inflicted on himself the wound which now threatened his life. That this was simply an unfortunate accident devoid of any special symbolism he accepted without qualification. But the enigmatic presence of the terrace city, with its crumbling galleries and internal courts encrusted by the giant thistles and wire moss, seemed a huge man-made artefact which militated against the super-real naturalism of the delta. However, the terrace city, like the delta, was moving backwards in time, the baroque tracery of the serpent deities along the friezes dissolving and being replaced by the intertwined tendrils of the moss-plants, the pseudo-organic forms made by man in the image of nature reverting to their original. Kept at a distance behind him, as a huge backdrop, the ancient Toltec ruin seemed to brood in the dust like a decaying

mastodon, a dying mountain whose dark dream of the earth enveloped Gifford with its luminous presence.

'Do you feel well enough to move on?' Louise asked Gifford when they had received no word of Mechippe's messenger after a further week. She gazed down at him critically as he lay in the shade under the awning, his thin body almost invisible among the folds of the blankets and the monstrous tent over his leg, only the arrogant face with its stiffening beard reminding her of his identity. 'Perhaps if we met the search party halfway . . .'

Gifford shook his head, his eyes moving off across the bleached plain to the almost drained channels of the delta. 'Which search party? There isn't a boat with a shallow enough draught between here and Taxcol.'

'Perhaps they'll send a helicopter. They could see us from the air.'

'Helicopter? You've got a bee in your bonnet, Louise. We'll stay here for another week or so.'

'But your leg,' his wife insisted. 'A doctor should –'

'How can I move? Jerked about on a stretcher, I'd be dead within five minutes.' He looked up wearily at his wife's pale sunburnt face, waiting for her to go away.

She hovered over him uncertainly. Fifty yards away, Richard Lowry sat in the open air outside his tent, watching her quietly. Involuntarily, before she could prevent herself, her hand moved to straighten her hair.

'Is Lowry there?' Gifford asked.

'Richard? Yes.' Louise hesitated. 'We'll be back for lunch. I'll change your dressing then.'

As she stepped from his field of vision Gifford lifted his chin slightly to examine the beaches obscured by the morning haze. The baked mud slopes glistened like hot concrete, and only a thin trickle of black fluid leaked slowly along the troughs. Here and there small islands fifty yards in diameter, shaped like perfect hemispheres, rose off the floors of the channels, imparting a curious geometric formality to the landscape. The whole area remained completely motionless, but Gifford lay patiently in his stretcher-chair, waiting for the snakes to come out on to the beaches.

When he noticed Mechippe serving lunch to him he realized that Lowry and Louise had not returned from the site.

'Take it away.' He pushed aside the bowl of condensed soup. 'Bring me whisky soda. Double.' He glanced sharply at the Indian. 'Where's Mrs Gifford?'

Mechippe steered the soup bowl back on to his tray. 'Miss' Gifford coming soon, sir. Sun very hot, she wait till afternoon.'

Gifford lay back for a moment, thinking of Louise and Richard Lowry, the image of them together touching the barest residue of emotion. Then he tried to wave away the haze with his hand.

'What's that –?'

'Sir?'

'Damn it, I thought I saw one.' He shook his head slowly as the white form he had fleetingly glimpsed vanished among the opalescent slopes. 'Too early, though. Where's that whisky?'

'Coming, sir.'

Panting slightly after the exertion of sitting up, Gifford looked around restlessly at the clutter of tents. Diagonally behind him, emerging from the lengthening focus of his eyes, loomed the long ridges of the Toltec city. Somewhere among its spiral galleries and corridors were Louise and Richard Lowry. Looking down from one of the high terraces across the alluvial bench, the distant camp would seem like a few bleached husks, guarded by a dead man propped up in a chair.

'Darling, I'm awfully sorry. We tried to get back but I twisted my heel –' Louise Gifford laughed lightly at this '– rather as you did, now that I come to think of it. Perhaps I'll be joining you here in a day or two. I'm so glad Mechippe looked after you and changed the dressing. How do you feel? You look a lot better.'

Gifford nodded drowsily. The afternoon fever had subsided but he felt drained and exhausted, his awareness of his wife's chattering presence only stimulated by the whisky he had been drinking slowly all day. 'It's been a day at the zoo,' he said, adding, with tired humour: 'At the reptile enclosure.'

'You and your snakes. Charles, you are a scream.' Louise paced around the stretcher-chair, downwind of the cradle, then withdrew to the lee-side. She waved to Richard Lowry, who was carrying some specimen trays into his tent. 'Dick, I suggest we shower and then join Charles for drinks.'

'Great idea,' Lowry called back. 'How is he?'

'Much better.' To Gifford she said: 'You don't mind, Charles? It will do you good to talk a little.'

Gifford gestured vaguely with his head. When his wife had gone to her tent he focused his eyes carefully on the beaches. There, in the evening light, the snakes festered and writhed, their long forms gliding in and out of each other, the whole darkening horizon locked together by their serpentine embrace. There were now literally tens of thousands of them, reaching beyond the margins of the beach across the open ground towards the camp. During the afternoon, at the height of his fever, he had tried to call to them, but his voice had been too weak.

Later, over their cocktails, Richard Lowry asked: 'How do you feel, sir?' When Gifford made no reply he said: 'I'm glad to hear the leg is better.'

'You know, Dick, I think it's psychological,' Louise remarked. 'As soon as you and I are out of the way Charles improves.' Her eyes caught Richard Lowry's and held them.

Lowry played with his glass, a faintly self-assured smile on his bland face. 'What about the messenger? Is there any news?'

'Have you heard anything, Charles? Perhaps someone will fly over in a couple of days.'

During this exchange of pleasantries, and those which followed on the subsequent days, Charles Gifford remained silent and withdrawn, sinking more deeply into the interior landscape emerging from the beaches of the delta. His wife and Richard Lowry sat with him in the evenings when they returned from the terrace city, but he was barely aware of their presence. By now they seemed to move in a peripheral world, players in a marginal melodrama. Now and then he would think about them, but the effort seemed to lack point. His wife's involvement with Lowry left him unperturbed; if anything, he felt grateful to Lowry for freeing him from Louise.

Once, two or three days later, when Lowry came to sit by him in the evening, Gifford roused himself and said dryly: 'I hear you found treasure in the terrace city.' But before Lowry could produce a reply he relapsed again into his vigil.

One night shortly afterwards, when he was woken in the early hours of the morning by a sudden spasm of pain in his foot, he saw his wife and Lowry walking through the powdery blue darkness by the latter's tent. For a fleeting moment their embracing figures were like the snakes coiled together on the beaches.

'Mechippe!'

'Doctor?'

'*Mechippe!*'

'I am here, sir.'

'Tonight, Mechippe,' Gifford told him, 'you sleep in my tent. Understand? I want you near me. Use my bed, if you want. Will you hear if I call?'

'Of course, sir. I hear you.' The head-boy's polished ebony face regarded Gifford circumspectly. He now tended Gifford with a care that indicated that the latter, however much a novice, had at last entered the world of absolute values, composed of the delta and the snakes, the brooding presence of the Toltec ruin and his dying leg.

After midnight, Gifford lay quietly in the stretcher-chair, watching the full moon rise over the luminous beaches. Like a Medusa's crown, thousands of the snakes had climbed the crests of the beaches and were spreading thickly across the margins of the plain, their white backs exposed to the moonlight.

'Mechippe.'

The head-boy had been squatting silently in the shadows. 'Dr Gifford?'

Gifford spoke in a low but clear voice. 'Crutches. Over there.' As the head-boy passed the two carved sticks Gifford tossed aside the blankets. Carefully he withdrew his leg from the cradle, then sat up and lifted it on to the ground. He leaned forward into the crutches and found his balance. The bandaged foot, like a white club, stuck out in front of

him. 'Now. In the field-desk, right-hand drawer, there's my gun. Bring it to me.'

For once the head-boy hesitated. 'Gun, sir?'

'Smith & Wesson. It should be loaded, but there's a box of cartridges.'

Again the head-boy hesitated, his eyes roving to the two tents spaced in a line away from them, their entrances hooded by the dust canopies. The whole camp lay in silence, the light stirring of the wind muted by the still warm sand and the dark talcum-like air. 'Gun,' he said. 'Yes, sir.'

Easing himself slowly to his feet, Gifford paused uncertainly. His head swam with the exertion, but the huge anchor of his left foot held him to the ground. Taking the pistol, he gestured with it towards the delta.

'We're going to see the snakes, Mechippe. You help me. All right?'

Mechippe's eyes flashed in the moonlight. 'The snakes, sir?'

'Yes. You take me halfway there. Then you can come back. Don't worry, I'll be all right.'

Mechippe nodded slowly, his eyes looking out over the delta. 'I help you, doctor.'

Labouring slowly across the sand, Gifford steadied himself on the head-boy's arm. After a few steps he found his left leg too heavy to lift, and dragged the dead load through the soft sand.

'Christ, it's a long way.' They had covered twenty yards. By some optical freak the nearest snakes now seemed to be half a mile away, barely visible between the slight rises. 'Let's get on with it.'

They plodded on a further ten yards. The open mouth of Lowry's tent was on their left, the white bell of the mosquito net looming in the shadows like a sepulchre. Almost exhausted, Gifford tottered unsteadily, trying to focus his eyes through the tinted air.

There was a sudden flash and roar as the revolver discharged itself, cannoning out of his hand. He felt Mechippe's fingers stiffen on his arm, and heard someone emerge from Lowry's tent, a woman's startled cry of fear. A second figure, this time a man's, appeared and with a backward glance at Gifford darted away like a startled animal among the tents, racing head down towards the terrace city.

Annoyed by these interruptions, Gifford searched blindly for the revolver, struggling with the crutches. But the darkness condensed around him, and the sand came upwards to strike his face.

The next morning, as the tents were dismantled and packed away, Gifford felt too tired to look out across the delta. The snakes never appeared until the early afternoon, and the disappointment of failing to reach them the previous night had drained his energy.

When only his own tent remained of the camp, and the naked shower scaffoldings protruded from the ground like pieces of abstract sculpture marking a futuristic cairn, Louise came over to him.

'It's time for them to pack your tent.' Her tone was matter-of-fact

but guarded. 'The boys are building a stretcher for you. You should be comfortable.'

Gifford gestured her away. 'I can't go. Leave Mechippe with me and take the others.'

'Charles, be practical for once.' Louise stood before him, her face composed. 'We can't stay here indefinitely, and you need treatment. It's obvious now that Mechippe's boy never reached Taxcol. Our supplies won't last for ever.'

'They don't have to last for ever.' Gifford's eyes, almost closed, surveyed the distant horizon like a pair of defective binoculars. 'Leave me one month's.'

'Charles –'

'For heaven's sake, Louise . . .' Wearily he let his head loll on the pillow. He noticed Richard Lowry supervising the stowage of the stores, the Indian boys moving around him like willing children. 'Why all the hurry? Can't you stay another week?'

'We can't, Charles.' She looked her husband straight in the face. 'Richard feels he must go. You understand. For your sake.'

'My sake?' Gifford shook his head. 'I don't give a damn about Lowry. Last night I was going out to look at the snakes.'

'Well . . .' Louise smoothed her bush shirt. 'This trip has been such a fiasco, Charles, there are many things that frighten me. I'll tell them to dismantle the tent when you're ready.'

'Louise.' With a last effort Gifford sat up. In a quiet voice, in order not to embarrass his wife by letting Richard Lowry hear him, he said: 'I went out to look at the *snakes*. You do understand that?'

'But Charles!' With a sudden burst of exasperation his wife snapped: 'Don't you realize, there are no snakes! Ask Mechippe, ask Richard Lowry or any of the boys! The entire river is as dry as a bone!'

Gifford turned to look at the white beaches of the delta. 'You and Lowry go. I'm sorry, Louise, but I couldn't stand the trip.'

'You must!' She gestured at the distant hills, at the terrace city and the delta. 'There's something wrong with this place, Charles, somehow it's convinced you that . . .'

Followed by a group of boys, Richard Lowry walked slowly towards them, signalling with his hands to Louise. She hesitated, then on an impulse waved him back and sat down beside Gifford. 'Charles, listen. I'll stay with you for another week as you ask, so that you can come to terms with these hallucinations, if you promise me that you'll leave then. Richard can go ahead on his own, he'll meet us in Taxcol with a doctor.' She lowered her voice, 'Charles, I'm sorry about Richard. I realize now . . .'

She leaned forward to see her husband's face. He lay in his seat in front of the solitary tent, the circle of boys watching him patiently from a distance. Ten miles away a solitary cloud drifted over one of the mesas, like a plume of smoke above a dormant but still active volcano.

'Charles.' She waited for her husband to speak, hoping that he would reprove and so perhaps even forgive her. But Charles Gifford was thinking only of the snakes on the beaches.

1964

THE DROWNED GIANT

On the morning after the storm the body of a drowned giant was washed ashore on the beach five miles to the north-west of the city. The first news of its arrival was brought by a nearby farmer and subsequently confirmed by the local newspaper reporters and the police. Despite this the majority of people, myself among them, remained sceptical, but the return of more and more eye-witnesses attesting to the vast size of the giant was finally too much for our curiosity. The library where my colleagues and I were carrying out our research was almost deserted when we set off for the coast shortly after two o'clock, and throughout the day people continued to leave their offices and shops as accounts of the giant circulated around the city.

By the time we reached the dunes above the beach a substantial crowd had gathered, and we could see the body lying in the shallow water two hundred yards away. At first the estimates of its size seemed greatly exaggerated. It was then at low tide, and almost all the giant's body was exposed, but he appeared to be a little larger than a basking shark. He lay on his back with his arms at his sides, in an attitude of repose, as if asleep on the mirror of wet sand, the reflection of his blanched skin fading as the water receded. In the clear sunlight his body glistened like the white plumage of a sea-bird.

Puzzled by this spectacle, and dissatisfied with the matter-of-fact explanations of the crowd, my friends and I stepped down from the dunes on to the shingle. Everyone seemed reluctant to approach the giant, but half an hour later two fishermen in wading boots walked out across the sand. As their diminutive figures neared the recumbent body a sudden hubbub of conversation broke out among the spectators. The two men were completely dwarfed by the giant. Although his heels were partly submerged in the sand, the feet rose to at least twice the fishermen's height, and we immediately realized that this drowned leviathan had the mass and dimensions of the largest sperm whale.

Three fishing smacks had arrived on the scene and with keels raised remained a quarter of a mile off-shore, the crews watching from the bows. Their discretion deterred the spectators on the shore from wading out across the sand. Impatiently everyone stepped down from the dunes and waited on the shingle slopes, eager for a closer view. Around the margins of the figure the sand had been washed away, forming a hollow,

as if the giant had fallen out of the sky. The two fishermen were standing between the immense plinths of the feet, waving to us like tourists among the columns of some water-lapped temple on the Nile. For a moment I feared that the giant was merely asleep and might suddenly stir and clap his heels together, but his glazed eyes stared skywards, unaware of the minuscule replicas of himself between his feet.

The fishermen then began a circuit of the corpse, strolling past the long white flanks of the legs. After a pause to examine the fingers of the supine hand, they disappeared from sight between the arm and chest, then re-emerged to survey the head, shielding their eyes as they gazed up at its Graecian profile. The shallow forehead, straight high-bridged nose and curling lips reminded me of a Roman copy of Praxiteles, and the elegantly formed cartouches of the nostrils emphasized the resemblance to monumental sculpture.

Abruptly there was a shout from the crowd, and a hundred arms pointed towards the sea. With a start I saw that one of the fishermen had climbed on to the giant's chest and was now strolling about and signalling to the shore. There was a roar of surprise and triumph from the crowd, lost in a rushing avalanche of shingle as everyone surged forward across the sand.

As we approached the recumbent figure, which was lying in a pool of water the size of a field, our excited chatter fell away again, subdued by the huge physical dimensions of this moribund colossus. He was stretched out at a slight angle to the shore, his legs carried nearer the beach, and this foreshortening had disguised his true length. Despite the two fishermen standing on his abdomen, the crowd formed itself into a wide circle, groups of three or four people tentatively advancing towards the hands and feet.

My companions and I walked around the seaward side of the giant, whose hips and thorax towered above us like the hull of a stranded ship. His pearl-coloured skin, distended by immersion in salt water, masked the contours of the enormous muscles and tendons. We passed below the left knee, which was flexed slightly, threads of damp sea-weed clinging to its sides. Draped loosely across the midriff, and preserving a tenuous propriety, was a shawl of heavy open-weaved material, bleached to a pale yellow by the water. A strong odour of brine came from the garment as it steamed in the sun, mingled with the sweet but potent scent of the giant's skin.

We stopped by his shoulder and gazed up at the motionless profile. The lips were parted slightly, the open eye cloudy and occluded, as if injected with some blue milky liquid, but the delicate arches of the nostrils and eyebrows invested the face with an ornate charm that belied the brutish power of the chest and shoulders.

The ear was suspended in mid-air over our heads like a sculptured doorway. As I raised my hand to touch the pendulous lobe someone appeared over the edge of the forehead and shouted down at me. Startled

by this apparition, I stepped back, and then saw that a group of youths had climbed up on to the face and were jostling each other in and out of the orbits.

People were now clambering all over the giant, whose reclining arms provided a double stairway. From the palms they walked along the forearms to the elbow and then crawled over the distended belly of the biceps to the flat promenade of the pectoral muscles which covered the upper half of the smooth hairless chest. From here they climbed up on to the face, hand over hand along the lips and nose, or forayed down the abdomen to meet others who had straddled the ankles and were patrolling the twin columns of the thighs.

We continued our circuit through the crowd, and stopped to examine the outstretched right hand. A small pool of water lay in the palm, like the residue of another world, now being kicked away by the people ascending the arm. I tried to read the palm-lines that grooved the skin, searching for some clue to the giant's character, but the distension of the tissues had almost obliterated them, carrying away all trace of the giant's identity and his last tragic predicament. The huge muscles and wrist-bones of the hand seemed to deny any sensitivity to their owner, but the delicate flexion of the fingers and the well-tended nails, each cut symmetrically to within six inches of the quick, argued a certain refinement of temperament, illustrated in the Graecian features of the face, on which the townsfolk were now sitting like flies.

One youth was even standing, arms wavering at his sides, on the very tip of the nose, shouting down at his companions, but the face of the giant still retained its massive composure.

Returning to the shore, we sat down on the shingle, and watched the continuous stream of people arriving from the city. Some six or seven fishing boats had collected off-shore, and their crews waded in through the shallow water for a closer look at this enormous storm-catch. Later a party of police appeared and made a half-hearted attempt to cordon off the beach, but after walking up to the recumbent figure any such thoughts left their minds, and they went off together with bemused backward glances.

An hour later there were a thousand people present on the beach, at least two hundred of them standing or sitting on the giant, crowded along his arms and legs or circulating in a ceaseless mêlée across his chest and stomach. A large gang of youths occupied the head, toppling each other off the cheeks and sliding down the smooth planes of the jaw. Two or three straddled the nose, and another crawled into one of the nostrils, from which he emitted barking noises like a dog.

That afternoon the police returned, and cleared a way through the crowd for a party of scientific experts – authorities on gross anatomy and marine biology – from the university. The gang of youths and most of the people on the giant climbed down, leaving behind a few hardy spirits perched on the tips of the toes and on the forehead. The experts strode

around the giant, heads nodding in vigorous consultation, preceded by the policemen who pushed back the press of spectators. When they reached the outstretched hand the senior officer offered to assist them up on to the palm, but the experts hastily demurred.

After they returned to the shore, the crowd once more climbed on to the giant, and was in full possession when we left at five o'clock, covering the arms and legs like a dense flock of gulls sitting on the corpse of a large fish.

I next visited the beach three days later. My friends at the library had returned to their work, and delegated to me the task of keeping the giant under observation and preparing a report. Perhaps they sensed my particular interest in the case, and it was certainly true that I was eager to return to the beach. There was nothing necrophilic about this, for to all intents the giant was still alive for me, indeed more alive than many of the people watching him. What I found so fascinating was partly his immense scale, the huge volumes of space occupied by his arms and legs, which seemed to confirm the identity of my own miniature limbs, but above all the mere categorical fact of his existence. Whatever else in our lives might be open to doubt, the giant, dead or alive, existed in an absolute sense, providing a glimpse into a world of similar absolutes of which we spectators on the beach were such imperfect and puny copies.

When I arrived at the beach the crowd was considerably smaller, and some two or three hundred people sat on the shingle, picnicking and watching the groups of visitors who walked out across the sand. The successive tides had carried the giant nearer the shore, swinging his head and shoulders towards the beach, so that he seemed doubly to gain in size, his huge body dwarfing the fishing boats beached beside his feet. The uneven contours of the beach had pushed his spine into a slight arch, expanding his chest and tilting back the head, forcing him into a more expressly heroic posture. The combined effects of sea-water and the tumefaction of the tissues had given the face a sleeker and less youthful look. Although the vast proportions of the features made it impossible to assess the age and character of the giant, on my previous visit his classically modelled mouth and nose suggested that he had been a young man of discreet and modest temper. Now, however, he appeared to be at least in early middle age. The puffy cheeks, thicker nose and temples and narrowing eyes gave him a look of well-fed maturity that even now hinted at a growing corruption to come.

This accelerated post-mortem development of the giant's character, as if the latent elements of his personality had gained sufficient momentum during his life to discharge themselves in a brief final resumé, continued to fascinate me. It marked the beginning of the giant's surrender to that all-demanding system of time in which the rest of humanity finds itself, and of which, like the million twisted ripples of a fragmented whirlpool, our finite lives are the concluding products. I took up my position on the

shingle directly opposite the giant's head, from where I could see the new arrivals and the children clambering over the legs and arms.

Among the morning's visitors were a number of men in leather jackets and cloth caps, who peered up critically at the giant with a professional eye, pacing out his dimensions and making rough calculations in the sand with spars of driftwood. I assumed them to be from the public works department and other municipal bodies, no doubt wondering how to dispose of this gargantuan piece of jetsam.

Several rather more smartly attired individuals, circus proprietors and the like, also appeared on the scene, and strolled slowly around the giant, hands in the pockets of their long overcoats, saying nothing to one another. Evidently its bulk was too great even for their matchless enterprise. After they had gone the children continued to run up and down the arms and legs, and the youths wrestled with each other over the supine face, the damp sand from their feet covering the white skin.

The following day I deliberately postponed my visit until the late afternoon, and when I arrived there were fewer than fifty or sixty people sitting on the shingle. The giant had been carried still closer to the shore, and was now little more than seventy-five yards away, his feet crushing the palisade of a rotting breakwater. The slope of the firmer sand tilted his body towards the sea, and the bruised face was averted in an almost conscious gesture. I sat down on a large metal winch which had been shackled to a concrete caisson above the shingle, and looked down at the recumbent figure.

His blanched skin had now lost its pearly translucence and was spattered with dirty sand which replaced that washed away by the night tide. Clumps of sea-weed filled the intervals between the fingers and a collection of litter and cuttle-bones lay in the crevices below the hips and knees. But despite this, and the continuous thickening of his features, the giant still retained his magnificent Homeric stature. The enormous breadth of the shoulders, and the huge columns of the arms and legs, still carried the figure into another dimension, and the giant seemed a more authentic image of one of the drowned Argonauts or heroes of the Odyssey than the conventional human-sized portrait previously in my mind.

I stepped down on to the sand, and walked between the pools of water towards the giant. Two small boys were sitting in the well of the ear, and at the far end a solitary youth stood perched high on one of the toes, surveying me as I approached. As I had hoped when delaying my visit, no one else paid any attention to me, and the people on the shore remained huddled beneath their coats.

The giant's supine right hand was covered with broken shells and sand, in which a score of footprints were visible. The rounded bulk of the hip towered above me, cutting off all sight of the sea. The sweetly acrid odour I had noticed before was now more pungent, and through the opaque skin I could see the serpentine coils of congealed blood-vessels. However

repellent it seemed, this ceaseless metamorphosis, a visible life in death, alone permitted me to set foot on the corpse.

Using the jutting thumb as a stair-rail, I climbed up on to the palm and began my ascent. The skin was harder than I expected, barely yielding to my weight. Quickly I walked up the sloping forearm and the bulging balloon of the biceps. The face of the drowned giant loomed to my right, the cavernous nostrils and huge flanks of the cheeks like the cone of some freakish volcano.

Safely rounding the shoulder, I stepped out on to the broad promenade of the chest, across which the bony ridges of the ribcage lay like huge rafters. The white skin was dappled by the darkening bruises of countless footprints, in which the patterns of individual heel-marks were clearly visible. Someone had built a small sandcastle on the centre of the sternum, and I climbed on to this partly demolished structure to give myself a better view of the face.

The two children had now scaled the ear and were pulling themselves into the right orbit, whose blue globe, completely occluded by some milk-coloured fluid, gazed sightlessly past their miniature forms. Seen obliquely from below, the face was devoid of all grace and repose, the drawn mouth and raised chin propped up by its gigantic slings of muscles resembling the torn prow of a colossal wreck. For the first time I became aware of the extremity of this last physical agony of the giant, no less painful for his unawareness of the collapsing musculature and tissues. The absolute isolation of the ruined figure, cast like an abandoned ship upon the empty shore, almost out of sound of the waves, transformed his face into a mask of exhaustion and helplessness.

As I stepped forward, my foot sank into a trough of soft tissue, and a gust of fetid gas blew through an aperture between the ribs. Retreating from the fouled air, which hung like a cloud over my head, I turned towards the sea to clear my lungs. To my surprise I saw that the giant's left hand had been amputated.

I stared with bewilderment at the blackening stump, while the solitary youth reclining on his aerial perch a hundred feet away surveyed me with a sanguinary eye.

This was only the first of a sequence of depredations. I spent the following two days in the library, for some reason reluctant to visit the shore, aware that I had probably witnessed the approaching end of a magnificent illusion. When I next crossed the dunes and set foot on the shingle the giant was little more than twenty yards away, and with this close proximity to the rough pebbles all traces had vanished of the magic which once surrounded his distant wave-washed form. Despite his immense size, the bruises and dirt that covered his body made him appear merely human in scale, his vast dimensions only increasing his vulnerability.

His right hand and foot had been removed, dragged up the slope and trundled away by cart. After questioning the small group of people

huddled by the breakwater, I gathered that a fertilizer company and a cattle food manufacturer were responsible.

The giant's remaining foot rose into the air, a steel hawzer fixed to the large toe, evidently in preparation for the following day. The surrounding beach had been disturbed by a score of workmen, and deep ruts marked the ground where the hands and foot had been hauled away. A dark brackish fluid leaked from the stumps, and stained the sand and the white cones of the cuttlefish. As I walked down the shingle I noticed that a number of jocular slogans, swastikas and other signs had been cut into the grey skin, as if the mutilation of this motionless colossus had released a sudden flood of repressed spite. The lobe of one of the ears was pierced by a spear of timber, and a small fire had burnt out in the centre of the chest, blackening the surrounding skin. The fine wood ash was still being scattered by the wind.

A foul smell enveloped the cadaver, the undisguisable signature of putrefaction, which had at last driven away the usual gathering of youths. I returned to the shingle and climbed up on to the winch. The giant's swollen cheeks had now almost closed his eyes, drawing the lips back in a monumental gape. The once straight Graecian nose had been twisted and flattened, stamped into the ballooning face by countless heels.

When I visited the beach the following day I found, almost with relief, that the head had been removed.

Some weeks elapsed before I made my next journey to the beach, and by then the human likeness I had noticed earlier had vanished again. On close inspection the recumbent thorax and abdomen were unmistakably manlike, but as each of the limbs was chopped off, first at the knee and elbow, and then at shoulder and thigh, the carcass resembled that of any headless sea-animal – whale or whale-shark. With this loss of identity, and the few traces of personality that had clung tenuously to the figure, the interest of the spectators expired, and the foreshore was deserted except for an elderly beachcomber and the watchman sitting in the doorway of the contractor's hut.

A loose wooden scaffolding had been erected around the carcass, from which a dozen ladders swung in the wind, and the surrounding sand was littered with coils of rope, long metal-handled knives and grappling irons, the pebbles oily with blood and pieces of bone and skin.

I nodded to the watchman, who regarded me dourly over his brazier of burning coke. The whole area was pervaded by the pungent smell of huge squares of blubber being simmered in a vat behind the hut.

Both the thigh-bones had been removed, with the assistance of a small crane draped in the gauze-like fabric which had once covered the waist of the giant, and the open sockets gaped like barn doors. The upper arms, collar bones and pudenda had likewise been dispatched. What remained of the skin over the thorax and abdomen had been marked out in parallel strips with a tar brush, and the first five or six sections

had been pared away from the midriff, revealing the great arch of the rib-cage.

As I left a flock of gulls wheeled down from the sky and alighted on the beach, picking at the stained sand with ferocious cries.

Several months later, when the news of his arrival had been generally forgotten, various pieces of the body of the dismembered giant began to reappear all over the city. Most of these were bones, which the fertilizer manufacturers had found too difficult to crush, and their massive size, and the huge tendons and discs of cartilage attached to their joints, immediately identified them. For some reason, these disembodied fragments seemed better to convey the essence of the giant's original magnificence than the bloated appendages that had been subsequently amputated. As I looked across the road at the premises of the largest wholesale merchants in the meat market, I recognized the two enormous thighbones on either side of the doorway. They towered over the porters' heads like the threatening megaliths of some primitive druidical religion, and I had a sudden vision of the giant climbing to his knees upon these bare bones and striding away through the streets of the city, picking up the scattered fragments of himself on his return journey to the sea.

A few days later I saw the left humerus lying in the entrance to one of the shipyards (its twin for several years lay on the mud among the piles below the harbour's principal commercial wharf). In the same week the mummified right hand was exhibited on a carnival float during the annual pageant of the guilds.

The lower jaw, typically, found its way to the museum of natural history. The remainder of the skull has disappeared, but is probably still lurking in the waste grounds or private gardens of the city – quite recently, while sailing down the river, I noticed two ribs of the giant forming a decorative arch in a waterside garden, possibly confused with the jaw-bones of a whale. A large square of tanned and tattooed skin, the size of an indian blanket, forms a backcloth to the dolls and masks in a novelty shop near the amusement park, and I have no doubt that elsewhere in the city, in the hotels or golf clubs, the mummified nose or ears of the giant hang from the wall above a fireplace. As for the immense pizzle, this ends its days in the freak museum of a circus which travels up and down the north-west. This monumental apparatus, stunning in its proportions and sometime potency, occupies a complete booth to itself. The irony is that it is wrongly identified as that of a whale, and indeed most people, even those who first saw him cast up on the shore after the storm, now remember the giant, if at all, as a large sea beast.

The remainder of the skeleton, stripped of all flesh, still rests on the sea shore, the clutter of bleached ribs like the timbers of a derelict ship. The contractor's hut, the crane and the scaffolding have been removed, and the sand being driven into the bay along the coast has buried the pelvis and backbone. In the winter the high curved bones are deserted, battered

by the breaking waves, but in the summer they provide an excellent perch for the sea-wearying gulls.

1964

THE GIOCONDA OF THE TWILIGHT NOON

'Those confounded gulls!' Richard Maitland complained to his wife. 'Can't you drive them away?'

Judith hovered behind the wheelchair, her hands glancing around his bandaged eyes like nervous doves. She peered across the lawn to the river bank. 'Try not to think about them, darling. They're just sitting there.'

'Just? That's the trouble!' Maitland raised his cane and struck the air vigorously. 'I can feel them all out there, watching me!'

They had taken his mother's house for his convalescence, partly on the assumption that the rich store of visual memories would in some way compensate for Maitland's temporary blindness – a trivial eye injury had become infected, eventually requiring surgery and a month's bandaged darkness. However, they had failed to reckon with the huge extension of his other senses. The house was five miles from the coast, but at low tide a flock of the greedy estuarine birds would fly up the river and alight on the exposed mud fifty yards from where Maitland sat in his wheelchair in the centre of the lawn. Judith could barely hear the gulls, but to Maitland their ravenous pecking filled the warm air like the cries of some savage Dionysian chorus. He had a vivid image of the wet banks streaming with the blood of thousands of dismembered fish.

Fretting impotently to himself, he listened as their voices suddenly fell away. Then, with a sharp sound like tearing cloth, the entire flock rose into the air. Maitland sat up stiffly in the wheelchair, the cane clasped like a cudgel in his right hand, half-expecting the gulls to swerve down on to the placid lawn, their fierce beaks tearing at the bandages over his eyes.

As if to conjure them away, he chanted aloud:

'The nightingales are singing near
The Convent of the Sacred Heart,
And sang within the bloody wood
When Agamemnon cried aloud . . . !'

During the fortnight since his return from the hospital Judith had read most of the early Eliot aloud to him. The flock of unseen gulls seemed to come straight out of that grim archaic landscape.

The birds settled again, and Judith took a few hesitant steps across the lawn, her dim form interrupting the even circle of light within his eyes.

'They sound like a shoal of piranha,' he said with a forced laugh. 'What are they doing – stripping a bull?'

'Nothing, dear, as far as I can see . . .' Judith's voice dipped on this last word. Even though Maitland's blindness was only temporary – in fact, by twisting the bandages he could see a blurred but coherent image of the garden with its willows screening the river – she still treated him to all the traditional circumlocutions, hedging him with the elaborate taboos erected by the seeing to hide them from the blind. The only real cripples, Maitland reflected, were the perfect in limb.

'Dick, I have to drive into town to collect the groceries. You'll be all right for half an hour?'

'Of course. Just sound the horn when you come back.'

The task of looking after the rambling country house single-handed – Maitland's widowed mother was on a steamer cruise in the Mediterranean – limited the time Judith could spend with him. Fortunately his long familiarity with the house saved her from having to guide him around it. A few rope hand-rails and one or two buffers of cotton wool taped to dangerous table corners had been enough. Indeed, once upstairs Maitland moved about the winding corridors and dark back staircases with more ease than Judith, and certainly with far more willingness – often in the evening she would go in search of Maitland and be startled to see her blind husband step soundlessly from a doorway two or three feet from her as he wandered among the old attics and dusty lofts. His rapt expression, as he hunted some memory of childhood, reminded her in a curious way of his mother, a tall, handsome woman whose bland smile always seemed to conceal some potent private world.

To begin with, when Maitland had chafed under the bandages, Judith had spent all morning and afternoon reading the newspapers aloud to him, then a volume of poems and even, heroically, the start of a novel, *Moby Dick*. Within a few days, however, Maitland had come to terms with his blindness, and the constant need for some sort of external stimulation faded. He discovered what every blind person soon finds out – that its external optical input is only part of the mind's immense visual activity. He had expected to be plunged into a profound Stygian darkness, but instead his brain was filled with a ceaseless play of light and colour. At times, as he lay back in the morning sunlight, he would see exquisite revolving patterns of orange light, like huge solar discs. These would gradually recede to brilliant pinpoints, shining above a veiled landscape across which dim forms moved like animals over an African veldt at dusk.

At other times forgotten memories would impinge themselves on this screen, what he assumed to be visual relics of his childhood long buried in his mind.

It was these images, with all their tantalizing associations, that most intrigued Maitland. By letting his mind drift into reverie he could almost summon them at will, watching passively as these elusive landscapes materialized like visiting spectres before his inner eye. One in particular,

composed of fleeting glimpses of steep cliffs, a dark corridor of mirrors and a tall, high-gabled house within a wall, recurred persistently, although its unrelated details owed nothing to his memory. Maitland tried to explore it, fixing the blue cliffs or the tall house in his mind and waiting for their associations to gather. But the noise of the gulls and Judith's to and fro movements across the garden distracted him.

''Bye, darling! See you later!'

Maitland raised his cane in reply. He listened to the car move off down the drive, its departure subtly altering the auditory profile of the house. Wasps buzzed among the ivy below the kitchen windows, hovering over the oil stains in the gravel. A line of trees swayed in the warm air, muffling Judith's last surge of acceleration. For once the gulls were silent. Usually this would have roused Maitland's suspicions, but he lay back, turning the wheels of the chair so that he faced the sun.

Thinking of nothing, he watched the aureoles of light mushroom soundlessly within his mind. Occasionally the shifting of the willows or the sounds of a bee bumping around the glass water jug on the table beside him would end the sequence. This extreme sensitivity to the faintest noise or movement reminded him of the hypersensitivity of epileptics, or of rabies victims in their grim terminal convulsions. It was almost as if the barriers between the deepest levels of the nervous system and the external world had been removed, those muffling layers of blood and bone, reflex and convention . . .

With a barely perceptible pause in his breathing, Maitland relaxed carefully in the chair. Projected on to the screen within his mind was the image he had glimpsed before, of a rocky coastline whose dark cliffs loomed through an off-shore mist. The whole scene was drab and colourless. Overhead low clouds reflected the pewter surface of the water. As the mist cleared he moved nearer the shore, and watched the waves breaking on the rocks. The plumes of foam searched like white serpents among the pools and crevices for the caves that ran deep into the base of the cliff.

Desolate and unfrequented, the coast reminded Maitland only of the cold shores of Tierra del Fuego and the ships' graveyards of Cape Horn, rather than of any memories of his own. Yet the cliffs drew nearer, rising into the air above him, as if their identity reflected some image deep within Maitland's mind.

Still separated from them by the interval of grey water, Maitland followed the shoreline, until the cliffs divided at the mouth of a small estuary. Instantly the light cleared. The water within the estuary glowed with an almost spectral vibrancy. The blue rocks of the surrounding cliffs, penetrated by small grottoes and caverns, emitted a soft prismatic light, as if illuminated by some subterranean lantern.

Holding this scene before him, Maitland searched the shores of the estuary. The caverns were deserted, but as he neared them the luminous archways began to reflect the light like a hall of mirrors. At the same

time he found himself entering the dark, high-gabled house he had seen previously, and which had now superimposed itself on his dream. Somewhere within it, masked by the mirrors, a tall, green-robed figure watched him, receding through the caves and groynes . . .

A motor-car horn sounded, a gay succession of toots. The gravel grating beneath its tyres, a car swung into the drive.

'Judith here, darling,' his wife called. 'Everything all right?'

Cursing under his breath, Maitland fumbled for his cane. The image of the dark coast and the estuary with its spectral caves had gone. Like a blind worm, he turned his blunted head at the unfamiliar sounds and shapes in the garden.

'Are you all right?' Judith's footsteps crossed the lawn. 'What's the matter, you're all hunched up – have those birds been annoying you?'

'No, leave them.' Maitland lowered his cane, realizing that although not visibly present in his inward vision, the gulls had played an oblique role in its creation. The foam-white seabirds, hunters of the albatross . . .

With an effort he said: 'I was asleep.'

Judith knelt down and took his hands. 'I'm sorry. I'll ask one of the men to build a scarecrow. That should –'

'No!' Maitland pulled his hands away. 'They're not worrying me at all.' Levelling his voice, he said: 'Did you see anyone in the town?'

'Dr Phillips. He said you should be able to take off the bandages in about ten days.'

'Good. There's no hurry, though. I want the job done properly.'

After Judith had walked back to the house Maitland tried to return to his reverie, but the image remained sealed behind the screen of his consciousness.

At breakfast the next morning Judith read him the mail.

'There's a postcard from your mother. They're near Malta, somewhere called Gozo.'

'Give it to me.' Maitland felt the card in his hands. 'Gozo – that was Calypso's island. She kept Ulysses there for seven years, promised him eternal youth if he'd stay with her forever.'

'I'm not surprised.' Judith inclined the card towards her. 'If we could spare the time, you and I should go there for a holiday. Wine-dark seas, a sky like heaven, blue rocks. Bliss.'

'Blue?'

'Yes. I suppose it's the bad printing. They can't really be like that.'

'They are, actually.' Still holding the card, Maitland went out into the garden, feeling his way along the string guide-rail. As he settled himself in the wheelchair he reflected that there were other correspondences in the graphic arts. The same blue rocks and spectral grottos could be seen in Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*, one of the most forbidding and most enigmatic of his paintings. The madonna sitting on a bare ledge by the water beneath the dark overhang of the cavern's mouth was like the presiding spirit of some enchanted marine realm, waiting for those cast

on to the rocky shores of this world's end. As in so many of Leonardo's paintings, all its unique longings and terrors were to be found in the landscape in the background. Here, through an archway among the rocks, could be seen the crystal blue cliffs that Maitland had glimpsed in his reverie.

'Shall I read it out to you?' Judith had crossed the lawn.

'What?'

'Your mother's postcard. You're holding it in your hand.'

'Sorry. Please do.'

As he listened to the brief message, Maitland waited for Judith to return to the house. When she had gone he sat quietly for a few minutes. The distant sounds of the river came to him through the trees, and the faint cry of gulls swooping on to the banks further down the estuary.

This time, almost as if recognizing Maitland's need, the vision came to him quickly. He passed the dark cliffs, and the waves vaulting into the cave mouths, and then entered the twilight world of the grottoes beside the river. Outside, through the stone galleries, he could see the surface of the water glittering like a sheet of prisms, the soft blue light reflected in the vitreous mirrors which formed the cavern walls. At the same time he sensed that he was entering the high-gabled house, whose surrounding wall was the cliff face he had seen from the sea. The rock-like vaults of the house glowed with the olive-black colours of the marine deeps, and curtains of old lace-work hung from the doors and windows like ancient nets.

A staircase ran through the grotto, its familiar turnings leading to the inner reaches of the cavern. Looking upwards, he saw the green-robed figure watching him from an archway. Her face was hidden from him, veiled by the light reflected off the damp mirrors on the walls. Impelled forward up the steps, Maitland reached towards her, and for an instant the face of the figure cleared . . .

'Judith!' Rocking forward in his chair, Maitland searched helplessly for the water jug on the table, his left hand drumming at his forehead in an attempt to drive away the vision and its terrifying lamia.

'Richard! What is it?'

He heard his wife's hurried footsteps across the lawn, and then felt her hands steadying his own.

'Darling, what on earth's going on? You're pouring with perspiration!'

That afternoon, when he was left alone again, Maitland approached the dark labyrinth more cautiously. At low tide the gulls returned to the mud flats below the garden, and their archaic cries carried his mind back into its deeps like mortuary birds bearing away the body of Tristan. Guarding himself and his own fears, he moved slowly through the luminous chambers of the subterranean house, averting his eyes from the green-robed enchantress who watched him from the staircase.

Later, when Judith brought his tea to him on a tray, he ate carefully, talking to her in measured tones.

'What did you see in your nightmare?' she asked.

'A house of mirrors under the sea, and a deep cavern,' he told her. 'I could see everything, but in a strange way, like the dreams of people who have been blind for a long time.'

Throughout the afternoon and evening he returned to the grotto at intervals, moving circumspectly through the outer chambers, always aware of the robed figure waiting for him in the doorway to its innermost sanctum.

The next morning Dr Phillips called to change his dressing.

'Excellent, excellent,' he commented, holding his torch in one hand as he retaped Maitland's eyelids to his cheeks. 'Another week and you'll be out of this for good. At least you know what it's like for the blind.'

'One can envy them,' Maitland said.

'Really?'

'They see with an inner eye, you know. In a sense everything there is more real.'

'That's a point of view.' Dr Phillips replaced the bandages. He drew the curtains. 'What have you seen with yours?'

Maitland made no reply. Dr Phillips had examined him in the darkened study, but the thin torch beam and the few needles of light around the curtains had filled his brain like arc lights. He waited for the glare to subside, realizing that his inner world, the grotto, the house of mirrors and the enchantress, had been burned out of his mind by the sunlight.

'They're hypnagogic images,' Dr Phillips remarked, fastening his bag. 'You've been living in an unusual zone, sitting around doing nothing but with your optic nerves alert, a no-man's land between sleep and consciousness. I'd expect all sorts of strange things.'

After he had gone Maitland said to the unseen walls, his lips whispering below the bandages: 'Doctor, give me back my eyes.'

It took him two full days to recover from this brief interval of external sight. Laboriously, rock by rock, he re-explored the hidden coastline, willing himself through the enveloping sea-mists, searching for the lost estuary.

At last the luminous beaches appeared again.

'I think I'd better sleep alone tonight,' he told Judith. 'I'll use mother's room.'

'Of course, Richard. What's the matter?'

'I suppose I'm restless. I'm not getting much exercise and there are only three days to go. I don't want to disturb you.'

He found his own way into his mother's bedroom, glimpsed only occasionally during the years since his marriage. The high bed, the deep rustle of silks and the echoes of forgotten scents carried him back to his

earliest childhood. He lay awake all night, listening to the sounds of the river reflected off the cut-glass ornaments over the fireplace.

At dawn, when the gulls flew up from the estuary, he visited the blue grottoes again, and the tall house in the cliff. Knowing its tenant now, the green-robed watcher on the staircase, he decided to wait for the morning light. Her beckoning eyes, the pale lantern of her smile, floated before him.

However, after breakfast Dr Phillips returned.

'Right,' he told Maitland briskly, leading him in from the lawn. 'Let's have those bandages off.'

'For the last time, Doctor?' Judith asked. 'Are you sure?'

'Certainly. We don't want this to go on for ever, do we?' He steered Maitland into the study. 'Sit down here, Richard. You draw the curtains, Judith.'

Maitland stood up, feeling for the desk. 'But you said it would take three more days, Doctor.'

'I dare say. But I didn't want you to get over-excited. What's the matter? You're hovering about there like an old woman. Don't you want to see again?'

'*See*?' Maitland repeated numbly. 'Of course.' He subsided limply into a chair as Dr Phillips' hands unfastened the bandages. A profound sense of loss had come over him. 'Doctor, could I put it off for –'

'Nonsense. You can see perfectly. Don't worry, I'm not going to fling back the curtains. It'll be a full day before you can see freely. I'll give you a set of filters to wear. Anyway, these dressings let through more light than you imagine.'

At eleven o'clock the next morning, his eyes shielded only by a pair of sunglasses, Maitland walked out on to the lawn. Judith stood on the terrace, and watched him make his way around the wheelchair. When he reached the willows she called: 'All right, darling? Can you see me?'

Without replying, Maitland looked back at the house. He removed the sunglasses and threw them aside on to the grass. He gazed through the trees at the estuary, at the blue surface of the water stretching to the opposite bank. Hundreds of the gulls stood by the water, their heads turned in profile to reveal the full curve of their beaks. He looked over his shoulder at the high-gabled house, recognizing the one he had seen in his dream. Everything about it, like the bright river which slid past him, seemed dead.

Suddenly the gulls rose into the air, their cries drowning the sounds of Judith's voice as she called again from the terrace. In a dense spiral, gathering itself off the ground like an immense scythe, the gulls wheeled into the air over his head and swirled over the house.

Quickly Maitland pushed back the branches of the willows and walked down on to the bank.

* * *

A moment later, Judith heard his shout above the cries of the gulls. The sound came half in pain and half in triumph, and she ran down to the trees uncertain whether he had injured himself or discovered something pleasing.

Then she saw him standing on the bank, his head raised to the sunlight, the bright carmine on his cheeks and hands, an eager, unrepentant Oedipus.

1964

THE VOLCANO DANCES

They lived in a house on the mountain Tlaxihuatl half a mile below the summit. The house was built on a lava flow like the hide of an elephant. In the afternoon and evening the man, Charles Vandervell, sat by the window in the lounge, watching the fire displays that came from the crater. The noise rolled down the mountainside like a series of avalanches. At intervals a falling cinder hissed as it extinguished itself in the water tank on the roof. The woman slept most of the time in the bedroom overlooking the valley or, when she wished to be close to Vandervell, on the settee in the lounge.

In the afternoon she woke briefly when the 'devil-sticks' man performed his dance by the road a quarter of a mile from the house. This mendicant had come to the mountain for the benefit of the people in the village below the summit, but his dance had failed to subdue the volcano and prevent the villagers from leaving. As they passed him pushing their carts he would rattle his spears and dance, but they walked on without looking up. When he became discouraged and seemed likely to leave Vandervell sent the house-boy out to him with an American dollar. From then on the stick-dancer came every day.

'Is he still here?' the woman asked. She walked into the lounge, folding her robe around her waist. 'What's he supposed to be doing?'

'He's fighting a duel with the spirit of the volcano,' Vandervell said. 'He's putting a lot of thought and energy into it, but he hasn't a chance.'

'I thought you were on his side,' the woman said. 'Aren't you paying him a retainer?'

'That's only to formalize the relationship. To show him that I understand what's going on. Strictly speaking, I'm on the volcano's side.'

A shower of cinders rose a hundred feet above the crater, illuminating the jumping stick-man.

'Are you sure it's safe here?'

Vandervell waved her away. 'Of course. Go back to bed and rest. This thin air is bad for the complexion.'

'I feel all right. I heard the ground move.'

'It's been moving for weeks.' He watched the stick-man conclude his performance with a series of hops, as if leap-frogging over a partner. 'On his diet that's not bad.'

'You should take him back to Mexico City and put him in one of the cabarets. He'd make more than a dollar.'

'He wouldn't be interested. He's a serious artist, this Nijinsky of the mountainside. Can't you see that?'

The woman half-filled a tumbler from the decanter on the table. 'How long are you going to keep him out there?'

'As long as he'll stay.' He turned to face the woman. 'Remember that. When he leaves it will be time to go.'

The stick-man, a collection of tatters when not in motion, disappeared into his lair, one of the holes in the lava beside the road.

'I wonder if he met Springman?' Vandervell said. 'On balance it's possible. Springman would have come up the south face. This is the only road to the village.'

'Ask him. Offer him another dollar.'

'Pointless – he'd say he had seen him just to keep me happy.'

'What makes you so sure Springman is here?'

'He *was* here,' Vandervell corrected. 'He won't be here any longer. I was with Springman in Acapulco when he looked at the map. He came here.'

The woman carried her tumbler into the bedroom.

'We'll have dinner at nine,' Vandervell called to her. 'I'll let you know if he dances again.'

Left alone, Vandervell watched the fire displays. The glow shone through the windows of the houses in the village so that they seemed to glow like charcoal. At night the collection of hovels was deserted, but a few of the men returned during the day.

In the morning two men came from the garage in Ecuatan to reclaim the car which Vandervell had hired. He offered to pay a month's rent in advance, but they rejected this and pointed at the clinkers that had fallen on to the car from the sky. None of them was hot enough to burn the paintwork. Vandervell gave them each fifty dollars and promised to cover the car with a tarpaulin. Satisfied, the men drove away.

After breakfast Vandervell walked out across the lava seams to the road. The stick-dancer stood by his hole above the bank, resting his hands on the two spears. The cone of the volcano, partly hidden by the dust, trembled behind his back. He watched Vandervell when he shouted across the road. Vandervell took a dollar bill from his wallet and placed it under a stone. The stick-man began to hum and rock on the balls of his feet.

As Vandervell walked back along the road two of the villagers approached.

'Guide,' he said to them. 'Ten dollars. One hour.' He pointed to the lip of the crater but the men ignored him and continued along the road.

The surface of the house had once been white, but was now covered with grey dust. Two hours later, when the manager of the estate below the house rode up on a grey horse Vandervell asked: 'Is your horse white or black?'

'That's a good question, señor.'

'I want to hire a guide,' Vandervell said. 'To take me into the volcano.'

'There's nothing there, señor.'

'I want to look around the crater. I need someone who knows the pathways.'

'It's full of smoke, Señor Vandervell. Hot sulphur. Burns the eyes. You wouldn't like it.'

'Do you remember seeing someone called Springman?' Vandervell said. 'About three months ago.'

'You asked me that before. I remember two Americans with a scientific truck. Then a Dutchman with white hair.'

'That could be him.'

'Or maybe black, eh? As you say.'

A rattle of sticks sounded from the road. After warming up, the stick-dancer had begun his performance in earnest.

'You'd better get out of here, Señor Vandervell,' the manager said. 'The mountain could split one day.'

Vandervell pointed to the stick-dancer. 'He'll hold it off for a while.'

The manager rode away. 'My respects to Mrs Vandervell.'

'*Miss* Winston.'

Vandervell went into the lounge and stood by the window. During the day the activity of the volcano increased. The column of smoke rose half a mile into the sky, threaded by gleams of flame.

The rumbling woke the woman. In the kitchen she spoke to the house-boy.

'He wants to leave,' she said to Vandervell afterwards.

'Offer him more money,' he said without turning.

'He says everyone has left now. It's too dangerous to stay. The men in the village are leaving for good this afternoon.'

Vandervell watched the stick-dancer twirling his devil-sticks like a drum-major. 'Let him go if he wants to. I think the estate manager saw Springman.'

'That's good. Then he was here.'

'The manager sent his respects to you.'

'I'm charmed.'

Five minutes later, when the house-boy had gone, she returned to her bedroom. During the afternoon she came out to collect the film magazines in the bookcase.

Vandervell watched the smoke being pumped from the volcano. Now and then the devil-sticks man climbed out of his hole and danced on a mound of lava by the road. The men came down from the village for the last time. They looked at the stick-dancer as they walked on down the road.

* * *

At eight o'clock in the morning a police truck drove up to the village, reversed and came down again. Its roof and driving cabin were covered with ash. The policemen did not see the stick-dancer, but they saw Vandervell in the window of the house and stopped outside.

'Get out!' one of the policemen shouted. 'You must go now! Take your car! What's the matter?'

Vandervell opened the window. 'The car is all right. We're staying for a few days. Gracias, Sergeant.'

'No! Get out!' The policeman climbed down from the cabin. 'The mountain – pfft! Dust, burning!' He took off his cap and waved it. 'You go now.'

As he remonstrated Vandervell closed the window and took his jacket off the chair. Inside he felt for his wallet.

After he had paid the policemen they saluted and drove away. The woman came out of the bedroom.

'You're lucky your father is rich,' she said. 'What would you do if he was poor?'

'Springman was poor,' Vandervell said. He took his handkerchief from his jacket. The dust was starting to seep into the house. 'Money only postpones one's problems.'

'How long are you going to stay? Your father told me to keep an eye on you.'

'Relax. I won't come to any mischief here.'

'Is that a joke? With this volcano over our heads?'

Vandervell pointed to the stick-dancer. 'It doesn't worry him. This mountain has been active for fifty years.'

'Then why do we have to come here now?'

'I'm looking for Springman. I think he came here three months ago.'

'Where is he? Up in the village?'

'I doubt it. He's probably five thousand miles under our feet, sucked down by the back-pressure. A century from now he'll come up through Vesuvius.'

'I hope not.'

'Have you thought of that, though? It's a wonderful idea.'

'No. Is that what you're planning for me?'

Cinders hissed in the roof tank, spitting faintly like boiling rain.

'Think of them, Gloria – Pompeiian matrons, Aztec virgins, bits of old Prometheus himself, they're raining down on the just and the unjust.'

'What about your friend Springman?'

'Now that you remind me . . .' Vandervell raised a finger to the ceiling. 'Let's listen. What's the matter?'

'Is that why you came here? To think of Springman being burnt to ashes?'

'Don't be a fool.' Vandervell turned to the window.

'What are you worrying about, anyway?'

'Nothing,' Vandervell said. 'For once in a long time I'm not worrying

about anything at all.' He rubbed the pane with his sleeve. 'Where's the old devil-boy? Don't tell me he's gone.' He peered through the falling dust. 'There he is.'

The figure stood on the ridge above the road, illuminated by the flares from the crater. A pall of ash hung in the air around him.

'What's he waiting for?' the woman asked. 'Another dollar?'

'A lot more than a dollar,' Vandervell said. 'He's waiting for me.'

'Don't burn your fingers,' she said, closing the door.

That afternoon, when she came into the lounge after waking up, she found that Vandervell had left. She went to the window and looked up towards the crater. The falls of ash and cinders obscured the village, and hundreds of embers glowed on the lava flows. Through the dust she could see the explosions inside the crater lighting up the rim.

Vandervell's jacket lay over a chair. She waited for three hours for him to return. By this time the noise from the crater was continuous. The lava flows dragged and heaved like chains, shaking the walls of the house.

At five o'clock Vandervell had not come back. A second crater had opened in the summit of the volcano, into which part of the village had fallen. When she was sure that the devil-sticks man had gone, the woman took the money from Vandervell's jacket and drove down the mountain.

1964

THE BEACH MURDERS

Introduction

Readers hoping to solve the mystery of the Beach Murders – involving a Romanoff Princess, a CIA agent, two of his Russian counterparts and an American limbo dancer – may care to approach it in the form of the card game with which Quimby, the absconding State Department cipher chief, amused himself in his hideaway on the Costa Blanca. The principal clues have therefore been alphabetized. The correct key might well be a familiar phrase, e.g. PLAYMATE OF THE MONTH, *or meaningless, e.g.* qwertyuiop . . . *etc. Obviously any number of solutions is possible, and a final answer to the mystery, like the motives and character of Quimby himself, lies forever hidden*

Auto-erotic

As always after her bath, the reflection of her naked body filled the Princess with a profound sense of repose. In the triptych of mirrors above the dressing table she gazed at the endless replicas of herself, the scent of the Guerlain heliotrope soothing her slight migraine. She lowered her arms as the bedroom door opened. Through the faint mist of talcum she recognized the handsome, calculating face of the Russian agent whose photograph she had seen in Statler's briefcase that afternoon.

Brassière

Statler waded through the breaking surf. The left cup of the brassière in his hand was stained with blood. He bent down and washed it in the warm water. The pulsing headlamps of the Mercedes parked below the corniche road lit up the cove. Where the hell was Lydia? Somewhere along the beach a woman with a bloody breast would frighten the wits out of the Russian landing party.

Cordobés

The self-contained face of the bullfighter, part gamin, part Beatle, lay below Quimby as he set out the cards on the balcony table. Whatever else they said about the boy, he never moved his feet. By contrast Raissa was pacing around the bedroom like a tigress in rut. Quimby could hear her wide Slavic hips brushing against his Paisley dressing gown behind

the escritoire. What these obsessives in Moscow and Washington failed to realize was that for once he might have no motive at all.

Drinamyl

Those bloody little capsules, Raissa thought. No wonder the West was dying. Every time she was ready to lure Quimby over to Sir Giles's villa he took one of the tranquillizers, then went down to the sea and talked to the beachniks. At Benidorm he even had the nerve to bring one of the Swedish girls back to the apartment. Hair down to her knees, breasts like thimbles, the immense buttocks of a horse. Ugh.

Embonpoint

The Princess slid the remains of the eclair into her mouth. As she swallowed the pastry she pouted her cream-filled lips at Statler. He lowered his rolled-up copy of *Time Atlantic*, with its photo of Quimby before the House Committee. The dancers moved around the tea-terrace to the soft rhythm of the fox-trot. There was something sensuous, almost sexual, about Manon's compulsive eating of eclairs. This magnificent Serbo-Croat cow, had she any idea what was going to happen to her?

Fata Morgana

Lydia felt his hand move along the plastic zipper of her dress. She lay on the candlewick bedspread, gazing at the sea and the white sand. Apart from the dotty English milord who had rented the villa to them the place was empty. As Kovarski hesitated the silence seemed to amplify all the uncertainties she had noticed since their arrival at San Juan. The meeting at the nudist colony on the Isle du Levant had not been entirely fortuitous. She reached up and loosened the zip. As her breasts came out she turned to face him. Kovarski was sitting up on one elbow, staring through his Zeiss binoculars at the apartment block three hundred yards along the beach.

Guardia Civil

Quimby watched the olive-uniformed policemen ambling along the shore, their quaint Napoleonic hats shielding their eyes as they scanned the girls on the beach. When it came to the crunch, on whose side would they see themselves – Stat's, the Russians', or his own? Quimby shuffled the Cordobés-backed cards. The platinum-haired call-girl who lived in the next apartment was setting off for Alicante in her pink Fiat. Quimby sipped his whisky. Five minutes earlier he had discovered the concealed aerial of Raissa's transmitter.

Heterodyne

Kovarski was worried. The sight of Raissa's body on the pony skin reminded him that Statler was still to be reckoned with. The piercing whistle from the portable radio confirmed that Raissa had been lying

there since dusk. He knelt down, eyes lingering for a last moment on the silver clasps of her Gossard suspenders. He put his finger in her mouth and ran it around her gums, searching for the capsule. A cherry popped into his palm. With a grimace he dropped it into the vodkatini by the radio. He opened Raissa's right hand and from the frozen clasp of her thumb and forefinger removed the capsule. As he read the message his brow furrowed. What the devil had the Princess to do with Quimby? Was this some insane CIA plot to restore the Romanoffs?

Iguana

The jade reptile shattered on the tiled floor at Sir Giles's feet. With an effort he regained his balance. Pretending to straighten his Old Etonian tie, he touched the painful bruise under his breast-bone. He looked up at the tough, square-jawed face of the American girl. Would she hit him again? She glared at him contemptuously, bare feet planted wide on the pony skin. Ah well, he thought, there had been worse moments. At Dunkirk the bombs falling from the Stukas had made the beach drum like a dancing floor.

Jasmine

Statler gazed at the white salver-shaped flowers in the lobby. Their nacreous petals, bled of all colour, reminded him of Manon's skin, and then of Quimby's large pallid face, with its too-intelligent eyes watching over the sunken cheeks like a snide Buddha's. Was the exchange a fair one, the Princess for the complex, moody cipher chief? He walked out through the revolving doors of the hotel into the bright Alicante sunlight, realizing with a pang that he would never see Manon again.

Kleenex

Raissa bent forwards over the bed. With the ring finger of her right hand she lifted her eyelid. For a moment the elegant mask of her face was contorted like an obscene paroquet's. She tapped the lower lid and the micro-lens jumped on to the tissue. The minute R on its rim shone in the beam of the Anglepoise. She wiped the lenses and placed them in the polarimeter. As the door of the safe opened, revealing the dials of the transmitter, she listened to Quimby singing *Arrivederci Roma* in the bathroom. All that drinamyl and whisky would keep the pig drowsy for at least an hour.

Limbo

The bar had been a mere twelve inches from the floor, Kovarski recollected, as he felt the hard curve of Lydia's iliac crest under the midnight blue stretch pants. For once the nightclub in Benidorm was hushed, everyone watching as this demented American girl with the incredible thighs had edged under the bar, hips jerking to the throb of the juke-box. Kovarski picked his nose, involuntarily thinking about Stat. The CIA man had a face like ice.

Mercedes

The brake servos had gone. Holding the hand-brake, Lydia groped behind Kovarski's chest for the off-side door handle. The Russian lay against the sill, his handsome face beginning to sag like the first slide of an avalanche. As the door opened he fell backwards on to the gravel. Lydia released the hand-brake and let the car roll forward. When Kovarski had gone she wound up the window, elegantly starred by the bullet which had passed through the door. She flashed the headlamps for the last time and pressed the starter.

Neapolitan

Raissa finished off the remains of Quimby's ice-cream with the eager lips of a child. In three hours they would be six fathoms under the Mediterranean, due to surface for the first time in the Baltic. She would miss the sunlight, and the small, dark Spaniards with their melancholy eyes following her down the dusty street to the bodega. In the end it would be worth it. Throw away the Man-Tan, as Kovarski often quoted to her in his mock-Yevtushenko, the sky will soon be full of suns.

Oceanid

For a moment Manon realized that Kovarski was undecided whether to rape or kill her. She backed into the bathroom, her left hand covering her powdered breasts. The trapped steam billowed into Kovaraski's face. He goggled at her like an insane student in a Dostoevski novel. He stepped across the cork bathmat and took her elbow in a surprisingly tender gesture. Then the alabaster soap-dish caught her on the side of the head. A second later she was lying in a hot mess in the bath, Kovarski's arms moving over her head like pistons.

Poseidon

Quimby handled the bottle of Black Label with a respect due their long acquaintance. The proto-Atlantic ocean had covered all North America and Europe except for Scotland, leaving intact a percolation system 300 million years old. As he filled his glass he watched Sir Giles's villa on the bluff above the cove. The swarthy Russian and his American beatnik had moved in yesterday. No doubt Stat was at the Carlton in Alicante. Quimby set out the cards for the last game. The hand would be hard to play, but luckily he was still dealing.

Quietus

Statler was dying in the dark surf. As the Russian bosun let him drift away in the shallow water he was thinking of the Princess and her immense brown nipples. Had she borne a child then, keeping alive the fading memories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire? The burning wreck of the Mercedes shone through the water, illuminating the bodies of the two

Russians being dragged towards the dinghy. Statler lay back in the cold water as his blood ran out into the sea.

Remington

Lydia knelt by Kovarski's Travel-Riter. In the courtyard below the bedroom window Sir Giles was setting off for Alicante in his battered Citroën. That twitching old goat, did the English ever think about anything else? She removed the hood from the typewriter, then peered at the new ribbon she had inserted while Kovarski was in San Juan. The imprint of the letters shone in the sunlight. She jotted them on to the bridge pad, then tore off the sheet and slipped it into the left cup of her brassière.

Smith & Wesson

Kovarski blundered through the darkness among the dunes. Below him the surf broke like a lace shawl on the beach. The whole operation was going to pieces. By now Raissa should have been here with Quimby. He climbed the slope up to the Mercedes. As he felt for the pistol in the glove compartment something moved on the gravel behind him. The gun-flash lit up the interior of the car. Kovarski fell sideways across the seat. The second bullet passed through his chest and went on into the off-side door.

Tranquillizer

Statler opened the capsule and drew out the folded tissue. In Raissa's untouched vodkatini the rice paper flared like a Japanese water-flower. He fished it out with the toothpick and laid it on the salver. So this was how they made contact. He looked down at the body on the pony skin and smiled to himself. With luck Kovarski would literally eat his own words. As he turned the Russian girl over with his foot the cherry popped from her mouth. He pushed it back between her lips and went over to the Travel-Riter.

UV Lamp

With a sigh the Princess dropped the goggles into the douche-bag on the dressing table. In spite of her efforts, the months of summer bathing on the Côte d'Azur before her meeting with Stat, her skin remained as white as the jasmine blossoms in the lobby. In her veins ran the haemophilic blood of the Romanoffs, yet the time to revenge Ekaterinburg had passed. Did Stat realize this?

Vivaldi

Lydia tuned in Radio Algiers with a wet forefinger. The French had left some damned good records behind. She stood on the pony skin, admiring her tough, man-like hips as she dried herself after the swim. Her sharp nails caressed the cold skin of her breasts. Then she noticed Sir Giles's marmoset-like face peering at her through the fronds of the miniature palm beside the bedroom door.

Wave Speed

6,000 metres per second, enough to blow Stat straight through the rear window of the Merc. Kovarski lifted the hood and lowered the bomb into the slot behind the battery. Over his shoulder he peered into the darkness across the sea. Two miles out, where the deep water began, the submarine would be waiting, the landing party crouched by their dinghy under the conning-tower. He tightened the terminals, licking the blood from the reopened wound on his hand. The Princess had packed a lot of muscle under that incredible ivory skin.

XF-169

The Lockheed performance data would make a useful bonus, Raissa reflected as she slipped her long legs into the stretch pants. The charge account at GUM and the dacha in the Crimea were becoming a distinct possibility. The door opened behind her. Siphon in hand, Quimby stared at her half-naked figure. Without thinking, she put her hands over her breasts. For once his face registered an expression of surprising intelligence.

Yardley

Sir Giles helped himself to Statler's after-shave lotion. He looked down at the Princess. Even allowing for her size, the quantity of expressed blood was unbelievable. His small face was puckered with embarrassment as he met her blank eyes staring up at the shower fitment. He listened to the distant sounds of traffic coming through the empty suite. He turned on the shower. As the drops spattered on the red skin the magnificence of her white body made his mind reel.

Zeitgeist

The great fans of the *guardia civil* Sikorsky beat the air over the apartment block. Quimby bent down and retrieved two of the cards from the tiled floor. Below, along the beach road, the Spanish speed cops were converging on the wreck of the Mercedes. Quimby sat back as the helicopter battered away through the darkness. All in all, everything had worked out. The face of Cordobés still regarded him from the backs of the cards. A full moon was coming up over the Sierra. In the Alicante supermarket the hips of the counter girls shook to Trini Lopez. In the bodega wine was only ten pesetas a litre, and the man with the deck still controlled the play.

1966

THE DAY OF FOREVER

At Columbine Sept Heures it was always dusk. Here Halliday's beautiful neighbour, Gabrielle Szabo, walked through the evening, her silk robe stirring the fine sand into cerise clouds. From the balcony of the empty hotel near the artists' colony, Halliday would look out over the drained river at the unmoving shadows across the desert floor, the twilight of Africa, endless and unbroken, that beckoned to him with the promise of his lost dreams. The dark dunes, their crests touched by the spectral light, receded like the waves of a midnight sea.

Despite the almost static light, fixed at this unending dusk, the drained bed of the river seemed to flow with colours. As the sand spilled from the banks, uncovering the veins of quartz and the concrete caissons of the embankment, the evening would flare briefly, illuminated from within like a lava sea. Beyond the dunes the spires of old water towers and the half-completed apartment blocks near the Roman ruins at Leptis Magna emerged from the darkness. To the south, as Halliday followed the winding course of the river, the darkness gave way to the deep indigo tracts of the irrigation project, the lines of canals forming an exquisite bonelike gridwork.

This continuous transformation, whose colours were as strange as the bizarre paintings hung from the walls of his suite, seemed to Halliday to reveal the hidden perspectives of the landscape, and of the time whose hands were almost frozen on the dozen clocks standing on the mantelpiece and tables. The clocks, set to the imperceptible time of the forever day, he had brought with him to North Africa in the hope that here, in the psychic zero of the desert, they might somehow spring to life. The dead clocks that stared down from the municipal towers and hotels of the deserted towns were the unique flora of the desert, the unused keys that would turn the way into his dreams.

With this hope, three months earlier he had come to Columbine Sept Heures. The suffix, attached to the names of all cities and towns – there were London 6 p.m. and Saigon Midnight – indicated their positions on the Earth's almost stationary perimeter, the time of the endless day where the no longer rotating planet had marooned them. For five years Halliday had been living in the international settlement at Trondheim in Norway, a zone of eternal snow and ice, of pine forests whose arbours, fed by the unsetting sun, rose even higher around the fringes of the towns, shutting

them into their own isolation. This world of Nordic gloom had exposed all Halliday's latent difficulties with time and with his dreams. The difficulty of sleeping, even in a darkened room, disturbed everyone – there was the sense of time wasted and yet time unpassed as the sun hung stationary in the sky – but Halliday in particular found himself obsessed by his broken dreams. Time and again he would wake with an image before his eyes of the moonlit squares and classical façades of an ancient Mediterranean town, and of a woman who walked through colonnades in a world without shadows.

This warm night world he could find only by moving south. Two hundred miles to the east of Trondheim the dusk line was a corridor of freezing wind and ice, stretching on into the Russian steppe, where abandoned cities lay under the glaciers like closed jewels. By contrast, in Africa the night air was still warm. On the west of the dusk line was the boiling desert of the Sahara, the sand seas fused into lakes of glass, but along the narrow band of the terminator a few people lived in the old tourist towns.

It was here, at Columbine Sept Heures, an abandoned town beside the drained river five miles from Leptis Magna, that he first saw Gabrielle Szabo walking towards him as if out of his dreams. Here, too, he met Leonora Sully, the fey unconcerned painter of bizarre fantasies, and Dr Richard Mallory, who tried to help Halliday and bring back his dreams to him.

Why Leonora was at Columbine Sept Heures Halliday could understand, but sometimes he suspected that Dr Mallory's motives were as ambiguous as his own. The tall aloof physician, eyes forever hidden behind the dark glasses that seemed to emphasize his closed inner life, spent most of his time sitting in the white-domed auditorium of the School of Fine Arts, playing through the Bartok and Webern quartets left behind in the albums.

This music was the first sound Halliday heard when he arrived at the desert town. In the abandoned car park near the quay at Tripoli he found a new Peugeot left behind by a French refinery technician and set off south along the seven o'clock line, passing through the dusty towns and the half-buried silver skeletons of the refineries near the drained river. To the west the desert burned in a haze of gold under the unmoving sun. Rippled by the thermal waves, the metal vanes of the waterwheels by the empty irrigation systems seemed to revolve in the hot air, swerving toward him.

To the east the margins of the river were etched against the dark horizon, the ridges of exposed limestone like the forestage of the twilight world. Halliday turned toward the river, the light fading as he moved eastward, and followed the old metal road that ran near the bank. The centre of the channel, where white rocks jutted from the drifts of pebbles, lay like the spine of an ancient saurian.

A few miles from the coast he found Columbine Sept Heures. Four

tourist hotels, their curtain walls like dead mirrors, stood among the dunes that drifted through the streets and overran the chalets and swimming pools near the Fine Arts School. The road disappeared from sight outside the Oasis Hotel. Halliday left the car and walked up the steps to the dust-filled lobby. The sand lay in lacelike patterns across the tiled floor, silting against the pastel-coloured elevator doors and the dead palms by the restaurant.

Halliday walked up the stairway to the mezzanine, and stood by the cracked plateglass window beyond the tables. Already half submerged by the sand, what remained of the town seemed displaced by the fractured glass into another set of dimensions, as if space itself were compensating for the landscape's loss of time by forcing itself into this bizarre warp.

Already decided that he would stay in the hotel, Halliday went out to search for water and whatever food supplies had been left behind. The streets were deserted, choked with the sand advancing toward the drained river. At intervals the clouded windows of a Citroën or Peugeot emerged from the dunes. Stepping along their roofs, Halliday entered the drive of the Fine Arts School. Against the cerise pall of the dusk, the angular building rose into the air like a white bird.

In the students' gallery hung the fading reproductions of a dozen schools of painting, for the most part images of worlds without meaning. However, grouped together in a small alcove Halliday found the surrealists Delvaux, Chirico and Ernst. These strange landscapes, inspired by dreams that his own could no longer echo, filled Halliday with a profound sense of nostalgia. One above all, Delvaux's 'The Echo', which depicted a naked Junoesque woman walking among immaculate ruins under a midnight sky, reminded him of his own recurrent fantasy. The infinite longing contained in the picture, the synthetic time created by the receding images of the woman, belonged to the landscape of his unseen night. Halliday found an old portfolio on the floor below one of the trestles and began to strip the paintings from the walls.

As he walked across the roof to the outside stairway above the auditorium music was playing below him. Halliday searched the faces of the empty hotels, whose curtain walls lifted into the sunset air. Beyond the Fine Arts School the chalets of the students' quarter were grouped around two drained swimming pools.

Reaching the auditorium, he peered through the glass doors across the rows of empty seats. In the centre of the front row a man in a white suit and sunglasses was sitting with his back to Halliday. Whether he was actually listening to the music Halliday could not tell, but when the record ended three or four minutes later he stood up and climbed onto the stage. He switched off the stereogram and then strolled over to Halliday, his high face with its slightly inquisitorial look hidden behind the dark glasses.

'I'm Mallory – Dr Mallory.' He held out a strong but oblique hand. 'Are you staying here?'

The question seemed to contain a complete understanding of Halliday's

motives. Putting down his portfolio, Halliday introduced himself. 'I'm at the Oasis. I arrived this evening.'

Realizing that the remark was meaningless, Halliday laughed, but Mallory was already smiling.

'This evening? I think we can take that for granted.' When Halliday raised his wrist to reveal the old 24-hour Rolex he still wore, Mallory nodded, straightening his sunglasses as if looking at Halliday more closely. 'You still have one, do you? What is the time, by the way?'

Halliday glanced at the Rolex. It was one of four he had brought with him, carefully synchronized with the master 24-hour clock still running at Greenwich Observatory, recording the vanished time of the once-revolving earth. 'Nearly 7.30. That would be right. Isn't this Columbine Sept Heures?'

'True enough. A neat coincidence. However, the dusk line is advancing; I'd say it was a little later here. Still, I think we can take the point.' Mallory stepped down from the stage, where his tall figure had stood over Halliday like a white gallows. 'Seven-thirty, old time – and new. You'll have to stay at Columbine. It's not often one finds the dimensions locking like that.' He glanced at the portfolio. 'You're at the Oasis. Why there?'

'It's empty.'

'Cogent. But so is everything else here. Even so, I know what you mean, I stayed there myself when I first came to Columbine. It's damned hot.'

'I'll be on the dusk side.'

Mallory inclined his head in a small bow, as if acknowledging Halliday's seriousness. He went over to the stereogram and disconnected a motor car battery on the floor beside it. He placed the heavy unit in a canvas carryall and gave Halliday one of the handles. 'You can help me. I have a small generator at my chalet. It's difficult to re-charge, but good batteries are becoming scarce.'

As they walked out into the sunlight Halliday said, 'You can have the battery in my car.'

Mallory stopped. 'That's kind of you, Halliday. But are you sure you won't want it? There are other places than Columbine.'

'Perhaps. But I take it there's enough food for us all here.' Halliday gestured with his wristwatch. 'Anyway, the time is right. Or both times, I suppose.'

'And as many spaces as you want, Halliday. Not all of them around you. Why have you come here?'

'I don't know yet. I was living at Trondheim; I couldn't sleep there. If I can sleep again, perhaps I can dream.'

He started to explain himself but Mallory raised a hand to silence him. 'Why do you think we're all here, Halliday? Out of Africa, dreams walk. You must meet Leonora. She'll like you.'

They walked past the empty chalets, the first of the swimming pools on their right. In the sand on the bottom someone had traced out a huge zodiac pattern, decorated with shells and pieces of fractured tile.

They approached the next pool. A sand dune had inundated one of the chalets and spilled into the basin, but a small area of the terrace had been cleared. Below an awning a young woman with white hair sat on a metal chair in front of an easel. Her jeans and the man's shirt she wore were streaked with paint, but her intelligent face, set above a strong jaw, seemed composed and alert. She looked up as Dr Mallory and Halliday lowered the battery to the ground.

'I've brought a pupil for you, Leonora.' Mallory beckoned Halliday over. 'He's staying at the Oasis – on the *dusk* side.'

The young woman gestured Halliday towards a reclining chair beside the easel. He placed the portfolio against the back rest. 'They're for my room at the hotel,' he explained. 'I'm not a painter.'

'Of course. May I look at them?' Without waiting she began to leaf through the reproductions, nodding to herself at each one. Halliday glanced at the half-completed painting on the easel, a landscape across which bizarre figures moved in a strange procession, archbishops wearing fantastic mitres. He looked up at Mallory, who gave him a wry nod.

'Interesting, Halliday?'

'Of course. What about *your* dreams, doctor? Where do you keep them?'

Mallory made no reply, gazing down at Halliday with his dark sealed eyes. With a laugh, dispelling the slight tension between the two men, Leonora sat down on the chair beside Halliday.

'Richard won't tell us that, Mr Halliday. When we find his dreams we'll no longer need our own.'

This remark Halliday was to repeat to himself often over the subsequent months. In many ways Halliday's presence in the town seemed a key to all their roles. The white-suited physician, moving about silently through the sand-filled streets, seemed like the spectre of the forgotten noon, reborn at dusk to drift like his music between the empty hotels. Even at their first meeting, when Halliday sat beside Leonora, making a few automatic remarks but conscious only of her hips and shoulder touching his own, he sensed that Mallory, whatever his reasons for being in Columbine, had adjusted himself all too completely to the ambiguous world of the dusk line. For Mallory, Columbine Sept Heures and the desert had already become part of the inner landscapes that Halliday and Leonora Sully still had to find in their paintings.

However, during his first weeks in the town by the drained river Halliday thought more of Leonora and of settling himself in the hotel. Using the 24-hour Rolex, he still tried to sleep at 'midnight', waking (or more exactly, conceding the fact of his insomnia) seven hours later. Then, at the start of his 'morning', he would make a tour of the paintings hung on the walls of the seventh-floor suite, and go out into the town, searching the hotel kitchens and pantries for supplies of water and canned food. At this time – an arbitrary interval he imposed on the neutral landscape – he would

keep his back to the eastern sky, avoiding the dark night that reached from the desert across the drained river. To the west the brilliant sand beneath the over-heated sun shivered like the last dawn of the world.

At these moments Dr Mallory and Leonora seemed at their most tired, as if their bodies were still aware of the rhythms of the former 24-hour day. Both of them slept at random intervals – often Halliday would visit Leonora's chalet and find her asleep on the reclining chair by the pool, her face covered by the veil of white hair, shielded from the sun by the painting on her easel. These strange fantasies, with their images of bishops and cardinals moving in procession across ornamental landscapes, were her only activity.

By contrast, Mallory would vanish like a white vampire into his chalet, then emerge, refreshed in some way, a few hours later. After the first weeks Halliday came to terms with Mallory, and the two men would listen to the Webern quartets in the auditorium or play chess near Leonora beside the empty swimming pool. Halliday tried to discover how Leonora and Mallory had come to the town, but neither would answer his questions. He gathered only that they had arrived separately in Africa several years earlier and had been moving westward from town to town as the terminator crossed the continent.

On occasion, Mallory would go off into the desert on some unspecified errand, and then Halliday would see Leonora alone. Together they would walk along the bed of the drained river, or dance to the recordings of Masai chants in the anthropology library. Halliday's growing dependence on Leonora was tempered by the knowledge that he had come to Africa to seek, not this white-haired young woman with her amiable eyes, but the night-walking lamia within his own mind. As if aware of this, Leonora remained always detached, smiling at Halliday across the strange paintings on her easel.

This pleasant *ménage à trois* was to last for three months. During this time the dusk line advanced another half mile toward Columbine Sept Heures, and at last Mallory and Leonora decided to move to a small refinery town ten miles to the west. Halliday half expected Leonora to stay with him at Columbine, but she left with Mallory in the Peugeot. Sitting in the back seat, she waited as Mallory played the last Bartok quartet in the auditorium before disconnecting the battery and carrying it back to the car.

Curiously, it was Mallory who tried to persuade Halliday to leave with them. Unlike Leonora, the still unresolved elements in his relationship with Halliday made him wish to keep in touch with the younger man.

'Halliday, you'll find it difficult staying on here.' Mallory pointed across the river to the pall of darkness that hung like an immense wave over the town. Already the colours of the walls and streets had changed to the deep cyclamen of dusk. 'The night is coming. Do you realize what that means?'

'Of course, doctor. I've waited for it.'

'But, Halliday . . .' Mallory searched for a phrase. His tall figure, eyes hidden as ever by the dark glasses, looked up at Halliday across the steps of the hotel. 'You aren't an owl, or some damned desert cat. You've got to come to terms with this thing in the daylight.'

Giving up, Mallory went back to the car. He waved as they set off, reversing onto one of the dunes in a cloud of pink dust, but Halliday made no reply. He was watching Leonora Sully in the back seat with her canvas and easels, the stack of bizarre paintings that were echoes of her unseen dreams.

Whatever his feelings for Leonora, they were soon forgotten with his discovery a month later of a second beautiful neighbour at Columbine Sept Heures.

Half a mile to the north-east of Columbine, across the drained river, was an empty colonial mansion, once occupied by the manager of the refinery at the mouth of the river. As Halliday sat on his balcony on the seventh floor of the Oasis Hotel, trying to detect the imperceptible progress of the terminator, while the antique clocks around him ticked mechanically through the minutes and hours of their false days, he would notice the white façades of the house illuminated briefly in the reflected light of the sandstorms. Its terraces were covered with dust, and the columns of the loggia beside the swimming pool had toppled into the basin. Although only four hundred yards to the east of the hotel, the empty shell of the house seemed already within the approaching night.

Shortly before one of his attempts to sleep Halliday saw the headlamps of a car moving around the house. Its beams revealed a solitary figure who walked slowly up and down the terrace. Abandoning any pretence at sleep, Halliday climbed to the roof of the hotel, ten storeys above, and lay down on the suicide sill. A chauffeur was unloading suitcases from the car. The figure on the terrace, a tall woman in a black robe, walked with the random, uncertain movements of someone barely aware of what she was doing. After a few minutes the chauffeur took the woman by the arm, as if waking her from some kind of sleep.

Halliday watched from the roof, waiting for them to reappear. The strange trancelike movements of this beautiful woman – already her dark hair and the pale nimbus of her face drifting like a lantern on the incoming dusk convinced him that she was the dark lamia of all his dreams – reminded Halliday of his own first strolls across the dunes to the river, the testing of ground unknown but familiar from his sleep.

When he went down to his suite he lay on the brocaded settee in the sitting room, surrounded by the landscapes of Delvaux and Ernst, and fell suddenly into a deep slumber. There he saw his first true dreams, of classical ruins under a midnight sky, where moonlit figures moved past each other in a city of the dead.

The dreams were to recur each time Halliday slept. He would wake on the settee by the picture window, the darkening floor of the desert below,

aware of the dissolving boundaries between his inner and outer worlds. Already two of the clocks below the mantelpiece mirror had stopped. With their end he would at last be free of his former notions of time.

At the end of this week Halliday discovered that the woman slept at the same intervals as he did, going out to look at the desert as Halliday stepped onto his balcony. Although his solitary figure stood out clearly against the dawn sky behind the hotel the woman seemed not to notice him. Halliday watched the chauffeur drive the white Mercedes into the town. In his dark uniform he moved past the fading walls of the Fine Arts School like a shadow without form.

Halliday went down into the street and walked towards the dusk. Crossing the river, a drained Rubicon dividing his passive world at Columbine Sept Heures from the reality of the coming night, Halliday climbed the opposite bank past the wrecks of old cars and gasoline drums illuminated in the crepuscular light. As he neared the house the woman was walking among the sand-covered statuary in the garden, the crystals lying on the stone faces like the condensation of immense epochs of time.

Halliday hesitated by the low wall that encircled the house, waiting for the woman to look towards him. Her pale face, its high forehead rising above the dark glasses in some ways reminded him of Dr Mallory, the same screen that concealed a potent inner life. The fading light lingered among the angular planes of her temples as she searched the town for any signs of the Mercedes.

She was sitting in one of the chairs on the terrace when Halliday reached her, hands folded in the pockets of the silk robe so that only her pale face, with its marred beauty – the sunglasses seemed to shut it off like some inward night – was exposed to him.

Halliday stood by the glass-topped table, uncertain how to introduce himself. 'I'm staying at the Oasis – at Columbine Sept Heures,' he began. 'I saw you from the balcony.' He pointed to the distant tower of the hotel, its cerise façade raised against the dimming air.

'A neighbour?' The woman nodded at this. 'Thank you for calling on me. I'm Gabrielle Szabo. Are there many of you?'

'No – they've gone. There were only two of them anyway, a doctor and a young woman painter, Leonora Sully – the landscape here suited her.'

'Of course. A doctor, though?' The woman had taken her hands from her robe. They lay in her lap like a pair of fragile doves. 'What was he doing here?'

'Nothing.' Halliday wondered whether to sit down, but the woman made no attempt to offer him the other chair, as if she expected him to drift away as suddenly as he had arrived. 'Now and then he helped me with my dreams.'

'Dreams?' She turned her head towards him, the light revealing the slightly hollowed contours above her eyes. 'Are there dreams at Columbine Sept Heures, Mr –'

'Halliday. There are dreams now. The night is coming.'

The woman nodded, raising her face to the violet-hued dusk. 'I can feel it on my face – like a black sun. What do you dream about, Mr Halliday?'

Halliday almost blurted out the truth but with a shrug he said, 'This and that. An old ruined town – you know, full of classical monuments. Anyway, I did last night . . .' He smiled at this. 'I still have some of the old clocks left. The others have stopped.'

Along the river a plume of gilded dust lifted from the road. The white Mercedes sped towards them.

'Have you been to Leptis Magna, Mr Halliday?'

'The Roman town? It's by the coast, five miles from here. If you like, I'll go with you.'

'A good idea. This doctor you mentioned, Mr Halliday – where has he gone? My chauffeur . . . needs some treatment.'

Halliday hesitated. Something about the woman's voice suggested that she might easily lose interest in him. Not wanting to compete with Mallory again, he answered, 'To the north, I think; to the coast. He was leaving Africa. Is it urgent?'

Before she could reply Halliday was aware of the dark figure of the chauffeur, buttoned within his black uniform, standing a few yards behind him. Only a moment earlier the car had been a hundred yards down the road, but with an effort Halliday accepted this quantal jump in time. The chauffeur's small face, with its sharp eyes and tight mouth, regarded Halliday without comment.

'Gaston, this is Mr Halliday. He's staying at one of the hotels at Columbine Sept Heures. Perhaps you could give him a lift to the river crossing.'

Halliday was about to accept, but the chauffeur made no response to the suggestion. Halliday felt himself shiver in the cooler air moving toward the river out of the dusk. He bowed to Gabrielle Szabo and walked off past the chauffeur. As he stopped, about to remind her of the trip to Leptis Magna, he heard her say, 'Gaston, there was a doctor here.'

The meaning of this oblique remark remained hidden from Halliday as he watched the house from the roof of the Oasis Hotel. Gabrielle Szabo sat on the terrace in the dusk, while the chauffeur made his foraging journeys to Columbine and the refineries along the river. Once Halliday came across him as he rounded a corner near the Fine Arts School, but the man merely nodded and trudged on with his jerrican of water. Halliday postponed a further visit to the house. Whatever her motives for being there, and whoever she was, Gabrielle Szabo had brought him the dreams that Columbine Sept Heures and his long journey south had failed to provide. Besides, the presence of the woman, turning some key in his mind, was all he required. Rewinding his clocks, he found that he slept for eight or nine hours of the nights he set himself.

However, a week later he found himself again failing to sleep. Deciding to visit his neighbour, he went out across the river, walking into the dusk that lay ever deeper across the sand. As he reached the house the white Mercedes was setting off along the road to the coast. In the back Gabrielle Szabo sat close to the open window, the dark wind drawing her black hair into the slipstream.

Halliday waited as the car came towards him, slowing as the driver recognized him. Gaston's head leaned back, his tight mouth framing Halliday's name. Expecting the car to stop, Halliday stepped out into the road.

'Gabrielle . . . Miss Szabo –'

She leaned forward, and the white car accelerated and swerved around him, the cerise dust cutting his eyes as he watched the woman's masked face borne away from him.

Halliday returned to the hotel and climbed to the roof, but the car had disappeared into the darkness of the north-east, its wake fading into the dusk. He went down to his suite and paced around the paintings. The last of the clocks had almost run down. Carefully he wound each one, glad for the moment to be free of Gabrielle Szabo and the dark dream she had drawn across the desert.

When the clocks were going again he went down to the basement. For ten minutes he moved from car to car, stepping in and out of the Cadillacs and Citroëns. None of the cars would start, but in the service bay he found a Honda motorcycle, and after filling the tank managed to kick the engine into life. As he set off from Columbine the sounds of the exhaust reverberated off the walls around him, but a mile from the town, when he stopped to adjust the carburettor, the town seemed to have been abandoned for years, his own presence obliterated as quickly as his shadow.

He drove westward, the dawn rising to meet him. Its colours lightened, the ambiguous contours of the dusk giving way to the clear outlines of the dunes along the horizon, the isolated watertowers standing like welcoming beacons.

Losing his way when the road disappeared into the sand sea, Halliday drove the motorcycle across the open desert. A mile to the west he came to the edge of an old wadi. He tried to drive the cycle down the bank, then lost his balance and sprawled onto his back as the machine leapt away and somersaulted among the rocks. Halliday trudged across the floor of the wadi to the opposite bank. Ahead of him, its silver gantries and tank farms shining in the dawn light, was an abandoned refinery and the white roofs of the near-by staff settlement.

As he walked between the lines of chalets, past the empty swimming pools that seemed to cover all Africa, he saw the Peugeot parked below one of the ports. Sitting with her easel was Leonora Sully, a tall man in a white suit beside her. At first Halliday failed to recognize him, although the man rose and waved to him. The outline of his head and high forehead

was familiar, but the eyes seemed unrelated to the rest of his face. Then Halliday recognized Dr Mallory and realized that, for the first time, he was seeing him without his sunglasses.

'Halliday . . . my dear chap.' Mallory stepped around the drained pool to greet him, adjusting the silk scarf in the neck of his shirt. 'We thought you'd come one day . . .' He turned to Leonora, who was smiling at Halliday. 'To tell you the truth we were beginning to get a little worried about him, weren't we, Leonora?'

'Halliday . . .' Leonora took his arm and steered him round to face the sun. 'What's happened – you're so pale!'

'He's been sleeping, Leonora. Can't you see that, my dear?' Mallory smiled down at Halliday. 'Columbine Sept Heures is beyond the dusk line now. Halliday, you have the face of a dreamer.'

Halliday nodded. 'It's good to leave the dusk, Leonora. The dreams weren't worth searching for.' When she looked away Halliday turned to Mallory. The doctor's eyes disturbed him. The white skin in the orbits seemed to isolate them, as if the level gaze was coming from a concealed face. Something warned him that the absence of the sunglasses marked a change in Mallory whose significance he had not yet grasped.

Avoiding the eyes, Halliday pointed to the empty easel. 'You're not painting, Leonora.'

'I don't need to, Halliday. You see . . .' She turned to take Mallory's hand. 'We have our own dreams now. They come to us across the desert like jewelled birds . . .'

Halliday watched them as they stood together. Then Mallory stepped forward, his white eyes like spectres. 'Halliday, of course it's good to see you . . . you'd probably like to stay here –'

Halliday shook his head. 'I came for my car,' he said in a controlled voice. He pointed to the Peugeot. 'Can I take it?'

'My dear chap, naturally. But where are –' Mallory pointed warningly to the western horizon, where the sun burned in an immense pall. 'The west is on fire, you can't go there.'

Halliday began to walk toward the car. 'I'm going to the coast.' Over his shoulder, he added, 'Gabrielle Szabo is there.'

This time, as he fled towards the night, Halliday was thinking of the white house across the river, sinking into the last light of the desert. He followed the road that ran north-east from the refinery, and found a disused pontoon bridge that crossed the wadi. The distant spires of Columbine Sept Heures were touched by the last light of sunset.

The streets of the town were deserted, his own footsteps in the sand already drowned by the wind. He went up to his suite in the hotel. Gabrielle Szabo's house stood isolated on the far shore. Holding one of the clocks, its hands turning slowly within the ormolu case, Halliday saw the chauffeur bring the Mercedes into the drive. A moment later Gabrielle

Szabo appeared, a black wraith in the dusk, and the car set off toward the north-east.

Halliday walked around the paintings in the suite, gazing at their landscapes in the dim light. He gathered his clocks together and carried them onto the balcony, then hurled them down one by one onto the terrace below. Their shattered faces, the white dials like Mallory's eyes, looked up at him with unmoving hands.

Half a mile from Leptis Magna he could hear the sea washing on the beaches through the darkness, the onshore winds whipping at the crests of the dunes in the moonlight. The ruined columns of the Roman city rose beside the single tourist hotel that shut out the last rays of the sun. Halliday stopped the car by the hotel, and walked past the derelict kiosks at the outskirts of the town. The tall arcades of the forum loomed ahead, the rebuilt statues of Olympian deities standing on their pedestals above him.

Halliday climbed onto one of the arches, then scanned the dark avenues for any sign of the Mercedes. Uneager to venture into the centre of the town, he went back to his car, then entered the hotel and climbed to the roof.

By the sea, where the antique theatre had been dug from the dunes, he could see the white rectangle of the Mercedes parked on the bluff. Below the proscenium, on the flat semi-circle of the stage, the dark figure of Gabrielle Szabo moved to and fro among the shadows of the statues.

Watching her, and thinking of Delvaux's 'Echo', with its triplicated nymph walking naked among the classical pavilions of a midnight city, Halliday wondered whether he had fallen asleep on the warm concrete roof. Between his dreams and the ancient city below there seemed no boundary, and the moonlit phantoms of his mind moved freely between the inner and outer landscapes, as in turn the dark-eyed woman from the house by the drained river had crossed the frontiers of his psyche, bringing with her a final relief from time.

Leaving the hotel, Halliday followed the street through the empty town, and reached the rim of the amphitheatre. As he watched, Gabrielle Szabo came walking through the antique streets, the fleeting light between the columns illuminating her white face. Halliday moved down the stone steps to the stage, aware of the chauffeur watching him from the cliff beside the car. The woman moved towards Halliday, her hips swaying slowly from side to side.

Ten feet from him she stopped, her raised hands testing the darkness. Halliday stepped forward, doubting if she could see him at all behind the sunglasses she still wore. At the sound of his footsteps she flinched back, looking up towards the chauffeur, but Halliday took her hand.

'Miss Szabo. I saw you walking here.'

The woman held his hands in suddenly strong fingers. Behind the glasses her face was a white mask. 'Mr Halliday –' She felt his wrists,

as if relieved to see him. 'I thought you would come. Tell me, how long have you been here?'

'Weeks – or months, I can't remember. I dreamed of this city before I came to Africa. Miss Szabo, I used to see you walking here among these ruins.'

She nodded, taking his arm. Together they moved off among the columns. Between the shadowy pillars of the balustrade was the sea, the white caps of the waves rolling towards the beach.

'Gabrielle . . . why are you here? Why did you come to Africa?'

She gathered the silk robe in one hand as they moved down a stairway to the terrace below. She leaned closely against Halliday, her fingers clasping his arm, walking so stiffly that Halliday wondered if she were drunk. 'Why? Perhaps to see the same dreams, it's possible.'

Halliday was about to speak when he noticed the footsteps of the chauffeur following them down the stairway. Looking around, and for one moment distracted from Gabrielle's swaying body against his own, he became aware of a pungent smell coming from the vent of one of the old Roman cloacas below them. The top of the brick-lined sewer had fallen in, and the basin was partly covered by the waves swilling in across the beach.

Halliday stopped. He tried to point below but the woman was holding his wrist in a steel grip. 'Down there! Can you see?'

Pulling his hand away, he pointed to the basin of the sewer, where a dozen half-submerged forms lay heaped together. Bludgeoned by the sea and wet sand, the corpses were only recognizable by the back-and-forth movements of their arms and legs in the shifting water.

'For God's sake – Gabrielle, who are they?'

'Poor devils . . .' Gabrielle Szabo turned away, as Halliday stared over the edge at the basin ten feet below. 'The evacuation – there were riots. They've been here for months.'

Halliday knelt down, wondering how long it would take the corpses – whether Arab or European he had no means of telling – to be swept out to sea. His dreams of Leptis Magna had not included these melancholy denizens of the sewers. Suddenly he shouted again.

'Months? Not that one!'

He pointed again to the body of a man in a white suit lying to one side farther up the sewer. His long legs were covered by the foam and water, but his chest and arms were exposed. Across the face was the silk scarf he had seen Mallory wearing at their last meeting.

'Mallory!' Halliday stood up, as the black-suited figure of the chauffeur stepped onto a ledge twenty feet above. Halliday went over to Gabrielle Szabo, who was standing by the step, apparently gazing out to sea. 'That's Dr Mallory! He lived with me at Columbine Sept Heures! How did he – Gabrielle, you knew he was here!'

Halliday seized her hands, in his anger jerked her forward, knocking

off her glasses. As she fell to her knees, scrambling helplessly for them, Halliday held her shoulders. 'Gabrielle! Gabrielle, you're –'

'Halliday!' Her head lowered, she held his fingers and pressed them into her orbits. 'Mallory, he did it – we knew he'd follow you here. He was my doctor once, I've waited for years . . .'

Halliday pushed her away, his feet crushing the sunglasses on the floor. He looked down at the white-suited figure washed by the waves, wondering what nightmare was hidden behind the scarf over its face, and sprinted along the terrace past the auditorium, then raced away through the dark streets.

As he reached the Peugeot the black-suited chauffeur was only twenty yards behind. Halliday started the motor and swung the car away through the dust. In the rear mirror he saw the chauffeur stop and draw a pistol from his belt. As he fired the bullet shattered the windshield. Halliday swerved into one of the kiosks, then regained control and set off with his head down, the cold night air blowing fragments of frosted glass into his face.

Two miles from Leptis, when there was no sight of the Mercedes in pursuit, he stopped and knocked out the windshield. As he drove on westward the air grew warmer, the rising dawn lifting in front of him with its promise of light and time.

1966

THE IMPOSSIBLE MAN

At low tide, their eggs buried at last in the broken sand below the dunes, the turtles began their return journey to the sea. To Conrad Foster, watching beside his uncle from the balustrade along the beach road, there seemed little more than fifty yards to the safety of the slack water. The turtles laboured on, their dark humps hidden among the orange crates and the drifts of kelp washed up from the sea. Conrad pointed to the flock of gulls resting on the submerged sandbank in the mouth of the estuary. The birds had been staring out to sea, as if uninterested in the deserted shoreline where the old man and the boy waited by the rail, but at this small movement of Conrad's a dozen white heads turned together.

'They've seen them . . .' Conrad let his arm fall to the rail. 'Uncle Theodore, do you think –?'

His uncle gestured with the stick at a car moving along the road a quarter of a mile away. 'It could have been the car.' He took his pipe from his mouth as a cry came from the sandbank. The first flight of gulls rose into the air and began to turn like a scythe towards the shore. 'Here they come.'

The turtles had emerged from the shelter of the debris by the tideline. They advanced across the sheet of damp sand that sloped down to the sea, the screams of the gulls tearing at the air over their heads.

Involuntarily Conrad moved away towards the row of chalets and the deserted tea garden on the outskirts of the town. His uncle held his arm. The turtles were being picked from the shallow water and dropped on the sand, then dismembered by a dozen beaks.

Within barely a minute of their arrival the birds began to rise from the beach. Conrad and his uncle had not been the only spectators of the gulls' brief feast. A small party of some dozen men stepped down from their vantage point among the dunes and moved along the sand, driving the last of the birds away from the turtles. The men were all elderly, well into their sixties and seventies, and wore singlets and cotton trousers rolled to their knees. Each carried a canvas bag and a wooden gaff tipped by a steel blade. As they picked up the shells they cleaned them with swift, practised movements and dropped them into their bags. The wet sand was streaked with blood, and soon the old men's bare feet and arms were covered with the bright stains.

'I dare say you're ready to move.' Uncle Theodore looked up at the sky,

following the gulls back to the estuary. 'Your aunt will have something waiting for us.'

Conrad was watching the old men. As they passed, one of them raised his ruby-tipped gaff in greeting. 'Who are they?' he asked as his uncle acknowledged the salute.

'Shell collectors – they come here in the season. These shells fetch a good price.'

They set off towards the town, Uncle Theodore moving at a slow pace with his stick. As he waited Conrad glanced back along the beach. For some reason the sight of the old men streaked with the blood of the slaughtered turtles was more disturbing than the viciousness of the seagulls. Then he remembered that he himself had probably set off the birds.

The sounds of a truck overlaid the fading cries of the gulls as they settled themselves on the sandbank. The old men had gone, and the incoming tide was beginning to wash the stained sand. They reached the crossing by the first of the chalets. Conrad steered his uncle to the traffic island in the centre of the road. As they waited for the truck to pass he said, 'Uncle, did you notice the birds never touched the sand?'

The truck roared past them, its high pantechnicon blocking off the sky. Conrad took his uncle's arm and moved forward. The old man plodded on, rooting his stick in the sandy tarmac. Then he flinched back, the pipe falling from his mouth as he shouted at the sports car swerving towards them out of the dust behind the truck. Conrad caught a glimpse of the driver's white knuckles on the rim of the steering wheel, a frozen face behind the windshield as the car, running down its own brakes, began to slide sideways across the road. Conrad started to push the old man back but the car was on them, bursting across the traffic island in a roar of dust.

The hospital was almost empty. During the first days Conrad was glad to lie motionlessly in the deserted ward, watching the patterns of light reflected on to the ceiling from the flowers on the window-sill, listening to the few sounds from the orderly room beyond the swing doors. At intervals the nurse would come and look at him. Once, when she bent down to straighten the cradle over his legs, he noticed that she was not a young woman but even older than his aunt, despite her slim figure and the purple rinse in her hair. In fact, all the nurses and orderlies who tended him in the empty ward were elderly, and obviously regarded Conrad more as a child than a youth of seventeen, treating him to a mindless and amiable banter as they moved about the ward.

Later, when the pain from his amputated leg roused him from this placid second sleep, Nurse Sadie at last began to look at his face. She told him that his aunt had come to visit him each day after the accident, and that she would return the following afternoon.

'. . . Theodore – Uncle Theodore . . . ?' Conrad tried to sit up but an

invisible leg, as dead and heavy as a mastodon's, anchored him to the bed. 'Mr Foster . . . my uncle. Did the car . . . ?'

'Missed him by yards, dear. Or let's say inches.' Nurse Sadie touched his forehead with a hand like a cool bird. 'Only a scratch on his wrist where the windshield cut it. My, the glass we took out of you, though, you looked as if you'd jumped through a greenhouse!'

Conrad moved his head away from her fingers. He searched the rows of empty beds in the ward. 'Where is he? Here . . . ?'

'At home. Your aunt's looking after him, he'll be right as rain.'

Conrad lay back, waiting for Nurse Sadie to go away so that he could be alone with the pain in his vanished leg. Above him the surgical cradle loomed like a white mountain. Strangely, the news that Uncle Theodore had escaped almost unscathed from the accident left Conrad without any sense of relief. Since the age of five, when the deaths of his parents in an air disaster had left him an orphan, his relationship with his aunt and uncle had been, if anything, even closer than that he would have had with his mother and father, their affection and loyalties more conscious and constant. Yet he found himself thinking not of his uncle, nor of himself, but of the approaching car. With its sharp fins and trim it had swerved towards them like the gulls swooping on the turtles, moving with the same rush of violence. Lying in the bed with the cradle over him Conrad remembered the turtles labouring across the wet sand under their heavy carapaces, and the old men waiting for them among the dunes.

Outside, the fountains played among the gardens of the empty hospital, and the elderly nurses walked in pairs to and fro along the shaded pathways.

The next day, before his aunt's visit, two doctors came to see Conrad. The older of the two, Dr Nathan, was a slim grey-haired man with hands as gentle as Nurse Sadie's. Conrad had seen him before, and remembered him from the first confused hours of his admission to the hospital. A faint half-smile always hung about Dr Nathan's mouth, like the ghost of some forgotten pleasantry.

The other physician, Dr Knight, was considerably younger, and by comparison seemed almost the same age as Conrad. His strong, square-jawed face looked down at Conrad with a kind of jocular hostility. He reached for Conrad's wrist as if about to jerk the youth from his bed on to the floor.

'So this is young Foster?' He peered into Conrad's eyes. 'Well, Conrad, I won't ask how you're feeling.'

'No . . .' Conrad nodded uncertainly.

'No, what?' Dr Knight smiled at Nathan, who was hovering at the foot of the bed like an aged flamingo in a dried-up pool. 'I thought Dr Nathan was looking after you very well.' When Conrad murmured something, shy of inviting another retort, Dr Knight sped on: 'Isn't he? Still, I'm more interested in your future, Conrad. This is where I take over from

Dr Nathan, so from now on you can blame me for everything that goes wrong.'

He pulled up a metal chair and straddled it, flicking out the tails of his white coat with a flourish. 'Not that anything will. Well?'

Conrad listened to Dr Nathan's feet tapping the polished floor. He cleared his throat. 'Where is everyone else?'

'You've noticed?' Dr Knight glanced across at his colleague. 'Still, you could hardly fail to.' He stared through the window at the empty grounds of the hospital. 'It's true, there is hardly anyone here.'

'A compliment to us, Conrad, don't you think?' Dr Nathan approached the bed again. The smile that hovered around his lips seemed to belong to another face.

'Yeesss . . .' Dr Knight drawled. 'Of course, no one will have explained to you, Conrad, but this isn't a hospital in quite the usual sense.'

'What –?' Conrad began to sit up, dragging at the cradle over his leg. 'What do you mean?'

Dr Knight raised his hands. 'Don't misinterpret me, Conrad. Of course this is a hospital, an advanced surgical unit, in fact, but it's also something more than a hospital, as I intend to explain.'

Conrad watched Dr Nathan. The older physician was gazing out of the window, apparently at the fountains, but for once his face was blank, the smile absent.

'In what way?' Conrad asked guardedly. 'Is it something to do with me?'

Dr Knight spread his hands in an ambiguous gesture. 'In a sense, yes. But we'll talk about this tomorrow. We've taxed you enough for the present.'

He stood up, his eyes still examining Conrad, and placed his hands on the cradle. 'We've a lot of work to do on this leg, Conrad. In the end, when we've finished, you'll be pleasantly surprised at what we can achieve here. In return, perhaps you can help us – we hope so, don't we, Dr Nathan?'

Dr Nathan's smile, like a returning wraith, hovered once again about his thin lips. 'I'm sure Conrad will be only too keen.'

As they reached the door Conrad called them back.

'What is it, Conrad?' Dr Knight waited by the next bed.

'The driver – the man in the car. What happened to him? Is he here?'

'As a matter of fact he is, but . . .' Dr Knight hesitated, then seemed to change course. 'To be honest, Conrad, you won't be able to see him. I know the accident was almost certainly his fault –'

'No!' Conrad shook his head. 'I don't want to blame him . . . we stepped out behind the truck. Is he here?'

'The car hit the steel pylon on the traffic island, then went on through the sea wall. The driver was killed on the beach. He wasn't much older than you, Conrad, in a way he may have been trying to save you and your uncle.'

Conrad nodded, remembering the white face like a scream behind the windshield.

Dr Knight turned towards the door. Almost *sotto voce* he added: 'And you'll see, Conrad, he can still help you.'

At three o'clock that afternoon Conrad's uncle appeared. Seated in a wheelchair, and pushed by his wife and Nurse Sadie, he waved cheerily to Conrad with his free hand as he entered the ward. For once, however, the sight of Uncle Theodore failed to raise Conrad's spirits. He had been looking forward to the visit, but his uncle had aged ten years since the accident and the sight of these three elderly people, one of them partially crippled, coming towards him with their smiling faces only reminded him of his isolation in the hospital.

As he listened to his uncle, Conrad realized that this isolation was merely a more extreme version of his own position, and that of all young people, outside the walls of the hospital. As a child Conrad had known few friends of his own age, for the single reason that children were almost as rare as centenarians had been a hundred years earlier. He had been born into a middle-aged world, one moreover where middle age itself was for ever moving, like the horizons of a receding universe, farther and farther from its original starting point. His aunt and uncle, both of them nearly sixty, represented the median line. Beyond them was the immense super-annuated army of the elderly, filling the shops and streets of the seaside town, their slow rhythms and hesitant walk overlaying everything like a grey veil.

By contrast, Dr Knight's self-confidence and casual air, however brusque and aggressive, quickened Conrad's pulse.

Towards the end of the visit, when his aunt had strolled to the end of the ward with Nurse Sadie to view the fountains, Conrad said to his uncle, 'Dr Knight told me he could do something for my leg.'

'I'm sure he can, Conrad.' Uncle Theodore smiled encouragingly, but his eyes watched Conrad without moving. 'These surgeons are clever men; it's amazing what they can do.'

'And your hand, Uncle?' Conrad pointed to the dressing that covered his uncle's left forearm. The hint of irony in his uncle's voice reminded him of Dr Knight's studied ambiguities. Already he sensed that people were taking sides around him.

'This hand?' His uncle shrugged. 'It's done me for nearly sixty years, a missing finger won't stop me filling my pipe.' Before Conrad could speak he went on: 'But that leg of yours is a different matter, you'll have to decide for yourself what to have done with it.'

Just before he left he whispered to Conrad, 'Rest yourself well, lad. You may have to run before you can walk.'

Two days later, promptly at nine o'clock, Dr Knight came to see Conrad. Brisk as ever, he came to the point immediately.

'Now, Conrad,' he began, replacing the cradle after his inspection, 'it's a month since your last stroll by the beach, time to get you out of here and back on your own feet again. What do you say?'

'*Feet?*' Conrad repeated. He managed a slight laugh. 'Do you mean that as a figure of speech?'

'No, I mean it literally.' Dr Knight drew up a chair. 'Tell me, Conrad, have you ever heard of restorative surgery? It may have been mentioned at school.'

'In biology – transplanting kidneys and that sort of thing. Older people have it done. Is that what you're going to do to my leg?'

'Whoa! Hold your horses. Let's get a few things straight first. As you say, restorative surgery goes back about fifty years, when the first kidney grafts were made, though for years before that corneal grafting was commonplace. If you accept that blood is a tissue the principle is even older – you had a massive blood transfusion after the accident, and later when Dr Nathan amputated the crushed knee and shinbone. Nothing surprising about that, is there?'

Conrad waited before answering. For once Dr Knight's tone had become defensive, as if he were already, by some sort of extrapolation, asking the questions to which he feared Conrad might subsequently object.

'No,' Conrad replied. 'Nothing at all.'

'Obviously, why should there be? Though it's worth bearing in mind that many people have refused to accept blood transfusions, even though it meant certain death. Apart from their religious objections, many of them felt that the foreign blood polluted their own bodies.' Dr Knight leaned back, scowling to himself. 'One can see their point of view, but remember that our bodies are almost completely composed of alien materials. We don't stop eating, do we, just to preserve our own absolute identity?' Dr Knight laughed here. 'That would be egotism run riot. Don't you agree?'

When Dr Knight glanced at him, as if waiting for an answer, Conrad said, 'More or less.'

'Good. And, of course, in the past most people have taken your point of view. The substitution of a healthy kidney for a diseased one doesn't in any way diminish your own integrity, particularly if your life is saved. What counts is your own continuing identity. By their very structure the individual parts of the body serve a larger physiological whole, and the human consciousness is great enough to provide any sense of unity.

'Now, no one ever seriously disputed this, and fifty years ago a number of brave men and women, many of them physicians, voluntarily gave their healthy organs to others who needed them. Sadly, all these efforts failed after a few weeks as a result of the so-called immunity reaction. The host body, even though it was dying, still fought against the graft as it would against any alien organism.'

Conrad shook his head. 'I thought they'd solved this immunity problem.'

'In time, yes – it was a question of biochemistry rather than any fault in the surgical techniques used. Eventually the way became clear, and every year tens of thousands of lives were saved – people with degenerative diseases of the liver, kidneys, alimentary tract, even portions of the heart and nervous system, were given transplanted organs. The main problem was where to obtain them – you may be willing to donate a kidney, but you can't give away your liver or the mitral valve in your heart. Luckily a great number of people willed their organs posthumously – in fact, it's now a condition of admission to a public hospital that in the event of death any parts of one's body may be used in restorative surgery. Originally the only organs that were banked were those of the thorax and abdomen, but today we have reserves of literally every tissue in the human body, so that whatever the surgeon requires is available, whether it's a complete lung or a few square centimetres of some specialized epithelium.'

As Dr Knight sat back Conrad pointed at the ward around him. 'This hospital . . . this is where it happens?'

'Exactly, Conrad. This is one of the hundreds of institutes we have today devoted to restorative surgery. As you'll understand, only a small percentage of the patients who come here are cases such as yours. The greatest application of restorative surgery has been for geriatric purposes, that is, for prolonging life in the aged.'

Dr Knight nodded deliberately as Conrad sat up. 'Now you'll understand, Conrad, why there have always been so many elderly people in the world around you. The reason is simple – by means of restorative surgery we've been able to give people who would normally die in their sixties and seventies a second span of life. The average life span has risen from sixty-five half a century ago to something close to ninety-five.'

'Doctor . . . the driver of the car. I don't know his name. You said he could still help me.'

'I meant what I said, Conrad. One of the problems of restorative surgery is that of supply. In the case of the elderly it's straightforward, if anything there's an excess of replacement materials over the demand. Apart from a few generalized degenerative conditions, most elderly people are faced with the failure of perhaps no more than one organ, and every fatality provides a reserve of tissues that will keep twenty others alive for as many years. However, in the case of the young, particularly in your age group, the demand exceeds supply a hundred-fold. Tell me, Conrad, quite apart from the driver of the car, how do you feel in principle about undergoing restorative surgery?'

Conrad looked down at the bedclothes. Despite the cradle, the asymmetry of his limbs was too obvious to miss. 'It's hard to say. I suppose I . . .'

'The choice is yours, Conrad. Either you wear a prosthetic limb – a metal support that will give you endless discomfort for the rest of your life, and prevent you from running and swimming, from all the normal movements of a young man – or else you have a leg of flesh and blood and bone.'

Conrad hesitated. Everything Dr Knight had said tallied with all he had heard over the years about restorative surgery – the subject was not taboo, but seldom discussed, particularly in the presence of children. Yet he was sure that this elaborate résumé was the prologue to some far more difficult decision he would have to take. 'When do you do this – tomorrow?'

'Good God, no!' Dr Knight laughed involuntarily, then let his voice roll on, dispelling the tension between them. 'Not for about two months, it's a tremendously complex piece of work. We've got to identify and tag all the nerve endings and tendons, then prepare an elaborate bone graft. For at least a month you'll be wearing an artificial limb – believe me, by the end you'll be looking forward to getting back on a real leg. Now, Conrad, can I assume that in general you're quite willing? We need both your permission and your uncle's.'

'I think so. I'd like to talk to Uncle Theodore. Still, I know I haven't really got any choice.'

'Sensible man.' Dr Knight held out his hand. As Conrad reached to take it he realized that Dr Knight was deliberately showing him a faint hairline scar that ran around the base of his thumb and then disappeared inside the palm. The thumb seemed wholly part of the hand, and yet detached from it.

'That's right,' Dr Knight told him. 'A small example of restorative surgery. Done while I was a student. I lost the top joint after infecting it in the dissecting room. The entire thumb was replaced. It's served me well; I couldn't really have taken up surgery without it.' Dr Knight traced the faint scar across his palm for Conrad. 'There are slight differences of course, the articulation for one thing – this one is a little more dexterous than my own used to be, and the nail is a different shape, but otherwise it feels like me. There's also a certain altruistic pleasure that one is keeping alive part of another human being.'

'Dr Knight – the driver of the car. You want to give me his leg?'

'That's true, Conrad. I should have to tell you, anyway, the patient must agree to the donor – people are naturally hesitant about being grafted to part of a criminal or psychopath. As I explained, for someone of your age it's not easy to find the appropriate donor . . .'

'But, Doctor –' For once Dr Knight's reasoning bewildered Conrad. 'There must be someone else. It's not that I feel any grudge against him, but . . . There's some other reason, isn't there?'

Dr Knight nodded after a pause. He walked away from the bed, and for a moment Conrad wondered if he was about to abandon the entire case. Then he turned on his heel and pointed through the window.

'Conrad, while you've been here has it occurred to you to wonder why this hospital is empty?'

Conrad gestured at the distant walls. 'Perhaps it's too large. How many patients can it take?'

'Over two thousand. It *is* large, but fifteen years ago, before I came here, it was barely big enough to deal with the influx of patients. Most of

them were geriatric cases – men and women in their seventies and eighties who were having one or more vital organs replaced. There were immense waiting lists, many of the patients were trying to pay hugely inflated fees – bribes, if you like – to get in.'

'Where have they all gone?'

'An interesting question – the answer in part explains why you're here, Conrad, and why we're taking a special interest in your case. You see, Conrad, about ten or twelve years ago hospital boards all over the country noticed that admission rates were starting to fall off. To begin with they were relieved, but the decline has gone on each year, until now the rate of admission is down to about one per cent of the previous intake. And most of these patients are surgeons and physicians, or members of the nursing staff.'

'But, Doctor – if they're not coming here . . .' Conrad found himself thinking of his aunt and uncle. 'If they won't come here that means they're choosing to . . .'

Dr Knight nodded. 'Exactly, Conrad. They're choosing to die.'

A week later, when his uncle came to see him again, Conrad explained to him Dr Knight's proposition. They sat together on the terrace outside the ward, looking out over the fountains at the deserted hospital. His uncle still wore a surgical mitten over his hand, but otherwise had recovered from the accident. He listened silently to Conrad.

'None of the old people are coming any more, they're lying at home when they fall ill and . . . waiting for the end. Dr Knight says there's no reason why in many cases restorative surgery shouldn't prolong life more or less indefinitely.'

'A sort of life. How does he think you can help them, Conrad?'

'Well, he believes that they need an example to follow, a symbol if you like. Someone like myself who's been badly hurt in an accident right at the start of his life might make them accept the real benefits of restorative surgery.'

'The two cases are hardly similar,' his uncle mused. 'However . . . How do you feel about it?'

'Dr Knight's been completely frank. He's told me about those early cases where people who'd had new organs and limbs literally fell apart when the seams failed. I suppose he's right. Life should be preserved – you'd help a dying man if you found him on the pavement, why not in some other case? Because cancer or bronchitis are less dramatic –'

'I understand, Conrad.' His uncle raised a hand. 'But why does he think older people are refusing surgery?'

'He admits he doesn't know. He feels that as the average age of the population rises there's a tendency for the old people to dominate society and set its mood. Instead of having a majority of younger people around them they see only the aged like themselves. The one way of escape is death.'

'It's a theory. One thing – he wants to give you the leg of the driver who hit us. That seems a strange touch. A little ghoulish.'

'No, it's the whole point – he's trying to say that once the leg is grafted it becomes part of *me*.' Conrad pointed to his uncle's mitten. 'Uncle Theodore, that hand. You lost two of the fingers. Dr Knight told me. Are you going to have them restored?'

His uncle laughed. 'Are you trying to make me your first convert, Conrad?'

Two months later Conrad re-entered the hospital to undergo the restorative surgery for which he had been waiting during his convalescence. On the previous day he accompanied his uncle on a short visit to friends who lived in the retirement hostels to the north-west of the town. These pleasant single-storey buildings in the chalet style, built by the municipal authority and let out to their occupants at a low rent, constituted a considerable fraction of the town's area. In the three weeks he had been ambulant Conrad seemed to have visited every one. The artificial limb with which he had been fitted was far from comfortable, but at Dr Knight's request his uncle had taken Conrad to all the acquaintances he knew.

Although the purpose of these visits was to identify Conrad to as many of the elderly residents as possible before he returned to the hospital – the main effort at conversion would come later, when the new limb was in place – Conrad had already begun to doubt whether Dr Knight's plan would succeed. Far from arousing any hostility, Conrad's presence elicited nothing but sympathy and goodwill from the aged occupants of the residential hostels and bungalows. Wherever he went the old people would come down to their gates and talk to him, wishing him well with his operation. At times, as he acknowledged the smiles and greetings of the grey-haired men and women watching on all sides from their balconies and gardens, it seemed to Conrad that he was the only young person in the entire town.

'Uncle, how do you explain the paradox?' he asked as they limped along together on their rounds, Conrad supporting his weight on two stout walking sticks. 'They want me to have a new leg but they won't go to the hospital themselves.'

'But you're young, Conrad, a mere child to them. You're having returned to you something that is your right: the ability to walk and run and dance. Your life isn't being prolonged beyond its natural span.'

'Natural span?' Conrad repeated the phrase wearily. He rubbed the harness of his leg beneath his trousers. 'In some parts of the world the natural life span is still little more than forty. Isn't it relative?'

'Not entirely, Conrad. Not beyond a certain point.' Although he had faithfully guided Conrad about the town, his uncle seemed reluctant to pursue the argument.

They reached the entrance to one of the residential estates. One of the town's many undertakers had opened a new office, and in the

shadows behind the leaded windows Conrad could see a prayer-book on a mahogany stand and discreet photographs of hearses and mausoleums. However veiled, the proximity of the office to the retirement homes disturbed Conrad as much as if a line of freshly primed coffins had been laid out along the pavement ready for inspection.

His uncle merely shrugged when Conrad mentioned this. 'The old take a realistic view of things, Conrad. They don't fear or sentimentalize death in quite the way the younger people do. In fact, they have a very lively interest in the matter.'

As they stopped outside one of the chalets he took Conrad's arm. 'A word of warning here, Conrad. I don't want to shock you, but you're about to meet a man who intends to put his opposition to Dr Knight into practice. Perhaps he'll tell you more in a few minutes than I or Dr Knight could in ten years. His name is Matthews, by the way, Dr James Matthews.'

'Doctor?' Conrad repeated. 'Do you mean a doctor of medicine?'

'Exactly. One of the few. Still, let's wait until you meet him.'

They approached the chalet, a modest two-roomed dwelling with a small untended garden dominated by a tall cypress. The door opened as soon as they touched the bell. An elderly nun in the uniform of a nursing order let them in with a brief greeting. A second nun, her sleeves rolled, crossed the passage to the kitchen with a porcelain pail. Despite their efforts, there was an unpleasant smell in the house which the lavish use of disinfectant failed to conceal.

'Mr Foster, would you mind waiting a few minutes. Good morning, Conrad.'

They waited in the dingy sitting room. Conrad studied the framed photographs over the rolltop desk. One was of a birdlike, grey-haired woman, whom he took to be the deceased Mrs Matthews. The other was an old matriculation portrait of a group of students.

Eventually they were shown into the small rear bedroom. The second of the two nuns had covered the equipment on the bedside table with a sheet. She straightened the coverlet on the bed and then went out into the hall.

Resting on his sticks, Conrad stood behind his uncle as the latter peered down at the occupant of the bed. The acid odour was more pungent and seemed to emanate directly from the bed. When his uncle beckoned him forward, Conrad at first failed to find the shrunken face of the man in the bed. The grey cheeks and hair had already merged into the unstarched sheets covered by the shadows from the curtained windows.

'James, this is Elizabeth's boy, Conrad.' His uncle pulled up a wooden chair. He motioned to Conrad to sit down. 'Dr Matthews, Conrad.'

Conrad murmured something, aware of the blue eyes that had turned to look at him. What surprised him most about the dying occupant of the bed was his comparative youth. Although in his middle sixties, Dr Matthews was twenty years younger than the majority of the tenants in the estate.

'He's grown into quite a lad, don't you think, James?' Uncle Theodore remarked.

Dr Matthews nodded, as if only half interested in their visit. His eyes were on the dark cypress in the garden. 'He has,' he said at last.

Conrad waited uncomfortably. The walk had tired him, and his thigh seemed raw again. He wondered if they would be able to call for a taxi from the house.

Dr Matthews turned his head. He seemed to be able to look at Conrad and his uncle with a blue eye on each of them. 'Who have you got for the boy?' he asked in a sharper voice. 'Nathan is still there, I believe . . .'

'One of the younger men, James. You probably won't know him, but he's a good fellow. Knight.'

'Knight?' The name was repeated with only a faint hint of comment. 'And when does the boy go in?'

'Tomorrow. Don't you, Conrad?'

Conrad was about to speak when he noticed that a faint simpering was coming from the man in the bed. Suddenly exhausted by this bizarre scene, and under the impression that the dying physician's macabre humour was directed at himself, Conrad rose in his chair, rattling his sticks together. 'Uncle, could I wait outside . . . ?'

'My boy –' Dr Matthews had freed his right hand from the bed. 'I was laughing at your uncle, not at you. He always had a great sense of humour. Or none at all. Which is it, Theo?'

'I see nothing funny, James. Are you saying I shouldn't have brought him here?'

Dr Matthews lay back. 'Not at all – I was there at his beginning, let him be here for my end . . .' He looked at Conrad again. 'I wish you the best, Conrad. No doubt you wonder why I don't accompany you to the hospital.'

'Well, I . . .' Conrad began, but his uncle held his shoulder.

'James, it's time for us to be leaving. I think we can take the matter as understood.'

'Obviously we can't.' Dr Matthews raised a hand again, frowning at the slight noise. 'I'll only be a moment, Theo, but if I don't tell him no one will, certainly not Dr Knight. Now, Conrad, you're seventeen?'

When Conrad nodded Dr Matthews went on: 'At that age, if I remember, life seems to stretch on for ever. One is probably living as close to eternity as is possible. As you get older, though, you find more and more that everything worthwhile has finite bounds, by and large those of time – from ordinary things to the most important ones, your marriage, children and so on, even life itself. The hard lines drawn around things give them their identity. Nothing is brighter than the diamond.'

'James, you've had enough –'

'Quiet, Theo.' Dr Matthews raised his head, almost managing to sit up. 'Perhaps, Conrad, you would explain to Dr Knight that it is just because we value our lives so much that we refuse to diminish them. There are

a thousand hard lines drawn between you and me, Conrad, differences of age, character and experience, differences of *time*. You have to earn these distinctions for yourself. You can't borrow them from anyone else, least of all from the dead.'

Conrad looked round as the door opened. The older of the nuns stood in the hall outside. She nodded to his uncle. Conrad settled his limb for the journey home, waiting for Uncle Theodore to make his goodbyes to Dr Matthews. As the nun stepped towards the bed he saw on the train of her starched gown a streak of blood.

Outside they plodded together past the undertakers, Conrad heaving himself along on his sticks. As the old people in the gardens waved to them Uncle Theodore said, 'I'm sorry he seemed to laugh at you, Conrad. It wasn't meant.'

'Was he there when I was born?'

'He attended your mother. I thought it only right that you should see him before he died. Why he thought it so funny I can't understand.'

Almost six months later to the day, Conrad Foster walked down towards the beach road and the sea. In the sunlight he could see the high dunes above the beach, and beyond them the gulls sitting out on the submerged sandbank in the mouth of the estuary. The traffic along the beach road was busier than he remembered from his previous visit, and the sand picked up by the wheels of the speeding cars and trucks drifted in clouds across the fields.

Conrad moved at a good pace along the road, testing his new leg to the full. During the past four months the bonds had consolidated themselves with the minimum of pain, and the leg was, if anything, stronger and more resilient than his own had ever been. At times, when he walked along without thinking, it seemed to stride ahead with a will of its own.

Yet despite its good service, and the fulfilment of all that Dr Knight had promised him for it, Conrad had failed to accept the leg. The thin hairline of the surgical scar that circled his thigh above the knee was a frontier that separated the two more absolutely than any physical barrier. As Dr Matthews had stated, its presence seemed to diminish him, in some way subtracting rather than adding to his own sense of identity. This feeling had grown with each week and month as the leg itself recovered its strength. At night they would lie together like silent partners in an uneasy marriage.

In the first month after his recovery Conrad had agreed to help Dr Knight and the hospital authorities in the second stage of their campaign to persuade the elderly to undergo restorative surgery rather than throw away their lives, but after Dr Matthew's death Conrad decided to take no further part in the scheme. Unlike Dr Knight, he realized that there was no real means of persuasion, and that only those on their deathbeds, such as Dr Matthews, were prepared to argue the matter at all. The others simply smiled and waved from their quiet gardens.

In addition, Conrad knew that his own growing uncertainty over the new limb would soon be obvious to their sharp eyes. A large scar now disfigured the skin above the shin-bone, and the reasons were plain. Injuring it while using his uncle's lawnmower, he had deliberately let the wound fester, as if this act of self-mutilation might symbolize the amputation of the limb. However, it seemed only to thrive on this blood letting.

A hundred yards away was the junction with the beach road, the fine sand lifting off the surface in the light breeze. A quarter of a mile away a line of vehicles approached at speed, the drivers of the cars at the rear trying to overtake two heavy trucks. Far away, in the estuary, there was a faint cry from the sea. Although tired, Conrad found himself breaking into a run. Somewhere a familiar conjunction of events was guiding him back towards the place of his accident.

As he reached the corner the first of the trucks was drawing close to him, the driver flashing his headlamps as Conrad hovered on the kerb, eager to get back to the pedestrian island with its freshly painted pylon.

Above the noise he saw the gulls rising into the air above the beach, and heard their harsh cries as the white sword drew itself across the sky. As it swept down over the beach the old men with their metal-tipped gaffs were moving from the road to their hiding-place among the dunes.

The truck thudded past him, the grey dust stinging his face as the slipstream whipped across it. A heavy saloon car rolled by, overtaking the truck and the other cars pressing behind it. The gulls began to dive and scream across the beach, and Conrad darted through the dust into the centre of the road and ran forward into the cars as they swerved towards him.

1966

STORM-BIRD, STORM-DREAMER

At dawn the bodies of the dead birds shone in the damp light of the marsh, their grey plumage hanging in the still water like fallen clouds. Each morning when Crispin went out on to the deck of the picket ship he would see the birds lying in the creeks and waterways where they had died two months earlier, their wounds cleansed now by the slow current, and he would watch the white-haired woman who lived in the empty house below the cliff walking by the river. Along the narrow beach the huge birds, larger than condors, lay at her feet. As Crispin gazed at her from the bridge of the picket ship she moved among them, now and then stooping to pluck a feather from the outstretched wings. At the end of her walk, when she returned across the damp meadow to the empty house, her arms would be loaded with immense white plumes.

At first Crispin had felt an obscure sense of annoyance at the way this strange woman descended on to the beach and calmly plundered the plumage of the dead birds. Although many thousands of the creatures lay along the margins of the river and in the marshes around the inlet where the picket ship was moored, Crispin still maintained a proprietary attitude towards them. He himself, almost single-handedly, had been responsible for the slaughter of the birds in the last terrifying battles when they had come from their eyries along the North Sea and attacked the picket ship. Each of the immense white creatures – for the most part gulls and gannets, with a few fulmars and petrels – carried *his* bullet in its heart like a jewel.

As he watched the woman cross the overgrown lawn to her house Crispin remembered again the frantic hours before the birds' final hopeless attack. Hopeless it seemed now, when their bodies lay in a wet quilt over the cold Norfolk marshes, but then, only two months earlier, when the sky above the ship had been dark with their massing forms, it was Crispin who had given up hope.

The birds had been larger than men, with wing spans of twenty feet or more that shut out the sun. Crispin had raced like a madman across the rusty metal decks, dragging the ammunition cans in his torn arms from the armoury and loading them into the breeches of the machine-guns, while Quimby, the idiot youth from the farm at Long Reach whom Crispin had persuaded to be his gun loader, gibbered to himself on the foredeck, hopping about on his club foot as he tried to escape from the

huge shadows sweeping across him. When the birds began their first dive, and the sky turned into a white scythe, Crispin had barely enough time to buckle himself into the shoulder harness of the turret.

Yet he had won, shooting the first wave down into the marshes as they soared towards him like a white armada, then turning to fire at the second group swooping in low across the river behind his back. The hull of the picket ship was still dented with the impacts their bodies had made as they struck the sides above the waterline. At the height of the battle the birds had been everywhere, wings like screaming crosses against the sky, their corpses crashing through the rigging on to the decks around him as he swung the heavy guns, firing from rail to rail. A dozen times Crispin had given up hope, cursing the men who had left him alone on this rusty hulk to face the giant birds, and who made him pay for Quimby out of his own pocket.

But then, when the battle had seemed to last for ever, when the sky was still full of birds and his ammunition had nearly gone, he noticed Quimby dancing on the corpses heaped on the deck, pitching them into the water with his two-pronged fork as they thudded around him.

Then Crispin knew that he had won. When the firing slackened Quimby dragged up more ammunition, eager for killing, his face and deformed chest smeared with feathers and blood. Shouting himself now, with a fierce pride in his own courage and fear, Crispin had destroyed the remainder of the birds, shooting the stragglers, a few fledgling peregrines, as they fled towards the cliff. For an hour after the last of the birds had died, when the river and the creeks near the ship ran red with their blood, Crispin had sat in the turret, firing the guns at the sky that had dared attack him.

Later, when the excitement and pulse of the battle had passed, he realized that the only witness of his stand against this aerial armageddon had been a club-footed idiot to whom no one would ever listen. Of course, the white-haired woman had been there, hiding behind the shutters in her house, but Crispin had not noticed her until several hours had passed, when she began to walk among the corpses. To begin with, therefore, he had been glad to see the birds lying where they had fallen, their blurred forms eddying away in the cold water of the river and the marshes. He sent Quimby back to his farm, and watched the idiot dwarf punt his way down-river among the swollen corpses. Then, crossed bandoliers of machine-gun cartridges around his chest, Crispin took command of his bridge.

The woman's appearance on the scene he welcomed, glad someone else was there to share his triumph, and well aware that she must have noticed him patrolling the captain's walk of the picket ship. But after a single glance the woman never again looked at him. She seemed intent only on searching the beach and the meadow below her house.

On the third day after the battle she had come out on to the lawn with Quimby, and the dwarf spent the morning and afternoon clearing away

the bodies of the birds that had fallen there. He heaped them on to a heavy wooden tumbril, then harnessed himself between the shafts and dragged them away to a pit near the farm. The following day he appeared again in a wooden skiff and punted the woman, standing alone in the bows like an aloof wraith, among the bodies of the birds floating in the water. Now and then Quimby turned one of the huge corpses over with his pole, as if searching for something among them – there were apocryphal stories, which many townsfolk believed, that the beaks of the birds carried tusks of ivory, but Crispin knew this to be nonsense.

These movements of the women puzzled Crispin, who felt that his conquest of the birds had also tamed the landscape around the picket ship and everything in it. Shortly afterwards, when the woman began to collect the wing feathers of the birds, he felt that she was in some way usurping a privilege reserved for him alone. Sooner or later the river voles, rats and other predators of the marshes would destroy the birds, but until then he resented anyone else looting this drowned treasure which he had won so hard. After the battle he had sent a short message in his crabbed handwriting to the district officer at the station twenty miles away, and until a reply came he preferred that the thousands of bodies should lie where they had fallen. As a conscripted member of the picket service he was not eligible for a bounty, but Crispin dimly hoped he might receive a medal or some sort of commendation.

The knowledge that the woman was his only witness, apart from the idiot Quimby, deterred Crispin from doing anything that might antagonize her. Also, the woman's odd behaviour made Crispin suspect that she too might be mad. He had never seen her at a shorter distance than the three hundred yards separating the picket ship from the bank below her house, but through the telescope mounted on the rail of the bridge he followed her along the beach, and saw more clearly the white hair and the ashen skin of her high face. Her arms were thin but strong, hands held at her waist as she moved about in a grey ankle-length robe. Her bedraggled appearance was that of someone unaware that she had lived alone for a long time.

For several hours Crispin watched her walking among the corpses. The tide cast a fresh freight on to the sand each day, but now that the bodies were decomposing their appearance, except at a distance, was devoid of any sentiment. The shallow inlet in which the picket ship was moored – the vessel was one of the hundreds of old coastal freighters hastily converted to duty when the first flocks of giant birds appeared two years earlier – faced the house across the river. Through the telescope Crispin could count the scores of pockmarks in the white stucco where spent bullets from his guns had lodged themselves.

At the end of her walk the woman had filled her arms with a garland of feathers. As Crispin watched, hands clasping the bandoliers across his chest, she went over to one of the birds, walking into the shallow water to peer into its half-submerged face. Then she plucked

a single plume from its wing and added it to the collection in her arms.

Restlessly Crispin returned to the telescope. In the narrow eyepiece her swaying figure, almost hidden by the spray of white feathers, resembled that of some huge decorative bird, a white peacock. Perhaps in some bizarre way she imagined she was a bird?

In the wheelhouse Crispin fingered the signal pistol fastened to the wall. When she came out the next morning he could fire one of the flares over her head, warning her that the birds were his, subjects of his own transitory kingdom. The farmer, Hassell, who had come with Quimby for permission to burn some of the birds for use as fertilizer, had plainly acknowledged Crispin's moral rights over them.

Usually Crispin made a thorough inspection of the ship each morning, counting the ammunition cases and checking the gunnery mountings. The metal caissons were splitting the rusty decks. The whole ship was settling into the mud below. At high tide Crispin would listen to the water pouring through a thousand cracks and rivet holes like an army of silver-tongued rats.

This morning, however, his inspection was brief. After testing the turret on the bridge – there was always the chance of a few stragglers appearing from the nesting grounds along the abandoned coast – he went back to his telescope. The woman was somewhere behind the house, cutting down the remains of a small rose pergola. Now and then she would look up at the sky and at the cliff above, scanning the dark line of the escarpment as if waiting for one of the birds.

This reminder that he had overcome his own fears of the giant birds made Crispin realize why he resented the woman plucking their feathers. As their bodies and plumage began to dissolve he felt a growing need to preserve them. Often he found himself thinking of their great tragic faces as they swooped down upon him, in many ways more to be pitied than feared, victims of what the district officer had called a 'biological accident' – Crispin vaguely remembered him describing the new growth promoters used on the crops in East Anglia and the extraordinary and unforeseen effects on the bird life.

Five years earlier Crispin had been working in the fields as a labourer, unable to find anything better after his wasted years of military service. He remembered the first of the new sprays being applied to the wheat and fruit crops, and the tacky phosphorescent residue that made them glimmer in the moonlight, transforming the placid agricultural backwater into a strange landscape where the forces of some unseen nature were forever gathering themselves in readiness. The fields had been covered with the dead bodies of gulls and magpies whose mouths were clogged with this silvering gum. Crispin himself had saved many of the half-conscious birds, cleaning their beaks and feathers, and sending them off to their sailing grounds along the coast.

Three years later the birds had returned. The first giant cormorants and

black-headed gulls had wing spans of ten or twelve feet, strong bodies and beaks that could slash a dog apart, Soaring low over the fields as Crispin drove his tractor under the empty skies, they seemed to be waiting for something.

The next autumn a second generation of even larger birds appeared, sparrows as fierce as eagles, gannets and gulls with the wing spans of condors. These immense creatures, with bodies as broad and powerful as a man's, flew out of the storms along the coast, killing the cattle in the fields and attacking the farmers and their families. Returning for some reason to the infected crops that had given them this wild spur to growth, they were the advance guard of an aerial armada of millions of birds that filled the skies over the country. Driven by hunger, they began to attack the human beings who were their only source of food.

Crispin had been too busy defending the farm where he lived to follow the course of the battle against the birds all over the world. The farm, only ten miles from the coast, had been besieged. After the dairy cattle had been slaughtered, the birds turned to the farm buildings. One night Crispin woke as a huge frigate bird, its shoulders wider than a door, had shattered the wooden shutters across his window and thrust itself into his room. Seizing his pitchfork, Crispin nailed it by the neck to the wall.

After the destruction of the farm, in which the owner, his family and three of the labourers died. Crispin volunteered to join the picket service. The district officer who headed the motorized militia column at first refused Crispin's offer of help. Surveying the small, ferret-like man with his beaked nose and the birthmark like a star below his left eye, hobbling in little more than a blood-streaked singlet across the wreck of the farmhouse, as the last of the birds wheeled away like giant crosses, the district officer had shaken his head, seeing in Crispin's eyes only the blind hunt for revenge.

However, when they counted the dead birds around the brick kiln where Crispin had made his stand, armed only with a scythe a head taller than himself, the officer had taken him on. He was given a rifle, and for half an hour they moved through the shattered fields near by, filled with the stripped skeletons of cattle and pigs, finishing off the wounded birds that lay there.

Finally, Crispin had come to the picket ship, a drab hulk rusting in a backwater of riverine creeks and marshes, where a dwarf punted his coracle among the dead birds and a mad woman bedecked herself on the beach with garlands of feathers.

For an hour Crispin paced round the ship, as the woman worked behind the house. At one point she appeared with a laundry basket filled with feathers and spread them out on a trestle table beside the rose pergola.

At the stern of the ship Crispin kicked open the galley door. He peered into the murky interior.

'Quimby! Are you there?'

This damp hovel was still maintained as a home from home by Quimby. The dwarf would pay sudden visits to Crispin, presumably in the hope of seeing further action against the birds.

When there was no reply Crispin shouldered his rifle and made for the gangway. Still eyeing the opposite shore, where a small fire was now sending a plume of grey smoke into the placid air, he tightened his bandoliers and stepped down the creaking gangway to the launch at the bottom.

The dead bodies of the birds were massed around the picket ship in a soggy raft. After trying to drive the launch through them Crispin stopped the outboard motor and seized the gaff. Many of the birds weighed as much as five hundred pounds, lying in the water with their wings interlocked, tangled up with the cables and rope tossed down from the decks. Crispin could barely push them apart with the gaff, and slowly forced the launch to the mouth of the inlet.

He remembered the district officer telling him that the birds were closely related to the reptiles – evidently this explained their blind ferocity and hatred of the mammals – but to Crispin their washed faces in the water looked more like those of drowned dolphins, almost manlike in their composed and individual expressions. As he made his way across the river past the drifting forms it seemed to him that he had been attacked by a race of winged men, driven on not by cruelty or blind instinct but by a sense of some unknown and irrevocable destiny. Along the opposite bank the silver forms of the birds lay among the trees and on the open patches of grass. As he sat in the launch on the water the landscape seemed to Crispin like the morning after some apocalyptic battle of the heavens, the corpses like those of fallen angels.

He moored the launch by the beach, pushing aside the dead birds lying in the shallows. For some reason a flock of pigeons, a few doves among them, had fallen at the water's edge. Their plump-breasted bodies, at least ten feet from head to tail, lay as if asleep on the damp sand, eyes closed in the warm sunlight. Holding his bandoliers to prevent them slipping off his shoulders, Crispin climbed the bank. Ahead lay a small meadow filled with corpses. He walked through them towards the house, now and then treading on the wing tips.

A wooden bridge crossed a ditch into the grounds of the house. Beside it, like a heraldic symbol pointing his way, reared the up-ended wing of a white eagle. The immense plumes with their exquisite modelling reminded him of monumental sculpture, and in the slightly darker light as he approached the cliff the apparent preservation of the birds' plumage made the meadow resemble a vast avian mortuary garden.

As he rounded the house the woman was standing by the trestle table, laying out more feathers to dry. To her left, beside the frame of the gazebo, was what Crispin at first assumed to be a bonfire of white feathers, piled on to a crude wooden framework she had built from the remains of the pergola. An air of dilapidation hung over the house – most of the windows

had been broken by the birds during their attacks over the past years, and the garden and yard were filled with litter.

The woman turned to face Crispin. To his surprise she gazed at him with a hard eye, unimpressed by the brigand-like appearance he presented with his cartridge bandoliers, rifle and scarred face. Through the telescope he had guessed her to be elderly, but in fact she was barely more than thirty years old, her white hair as thick and well groomed as the plumage of the dead birds in the fields around them. The rest of her, however, despite the strong figure and firm hands, was as neglected as the house. Her handsome face, devoid of all make-up, seemed to have been deliberately exposed to the cutting winter winds, and the long woollen robe she wore was stained with oil, its frayed hem revealing a pair of worn sandals.

Crispin came to a halt in front of her, for a moment wondering why he was visiting her at all. The few bales of feathers heaped on the pyre and drying on the trestle table seemed no challenge to his authority over the birds – the walk across the meadow had more than reminded him of that. Yet he was aware that something, perhaps their shared experience of the birds, bonded him and the young woman. The empty killing sky, the freighted fields silent in the sun, and the pyre beside them imposed a sense of a common past.

Laying the last of the feathers on the trestle, the woman said, 'They'll dry soon. The sun is warm today. Can you help me?'

Crispin moved forward uncertainly. 'How do you mean? Of course.'

The woman pointed to a section of the rose pergola that was still standing. A rusty saw was embedded in a small groove the woman had managed to cut in one of the uprights. 'Can you cut that down for me?'

Crispin followed her over to the pergola, unslinging his rifle. He pointed to the remains of a pine fence that had collapsed to one side of the old kitchen garden. 'You want wood? That'll burn better.'

'No – I need this frame. It's got to be strong.' She hesitated as Crispin continued to fiddle with his rifle, her voice more defensive. 'Can you do it? The little dwarf couldn't come today. He usually helps me.'

Crispin raised a hand to silence her. 'I'll help you.' He leaned his rifle against the pergola and took hold of the saw, after a few strokes freed it from its groove and made a clean start.

'Thank you.' As he worked the woman stood beside him, looking down with a friendly smile as the cartridge bandoliers began to flap rhythmically to the motion of his arm and chest.

Crispin stopped, reluctant to shed the bandoliers of machine-gun bullets, the badge of his authority. He glanced in the direction of the picket ship, and the woman, taking her cue, said, 'You're the captain? I've seen you on the bridge.'

'Well . . .' Crispin had never heard himself described as the vessel's captain, but the title seemed to carry a certain status. He nodded modestly. 'Crispin,' he said by way of introduction. 'Captain Crispin. Glad to help you.'

'I'm Catherine York.' Holding her white hair to her neck with one hand, the woman smiled again. She pointed to the rusting hulk. 'It's a fine ship.'

Crispin worked away at the saw, wondering whether she was missing the point. When he carried the frame over to the pyre and laid it at the base of the feathers he replaced his bandoliers with calculated effect. The woman appeared not to notice, but a moment later, when she glanced up at the sky, he raised his rifle and went up to her.

'Did you see one? Don't worry, I'll get it.' He tried to follow her eyes as they swept across the sky after some invisible object that seemed to vanish beyond the cliff, but she turned away and began to adjust the feathers mechanically. Crispin gestured at the fields around them, feeling his pulse beat again at the prospect and fear of battle. 'I shot all these . . .'

'What? I'm sorry, what did you say?' The woman looked around. She appeared to have lost interest in Crispin and was vaguely waiting for him to leave.

'Do you want more wood?' Crispin asked. 'I can get some.'

'I have enough.' She touched the feathers on the trestle, then thanked Crispin and walked off into the house, closing the hall door on its rusty hinges.

Crispin made his way across the lawn and through the meadow. The birds lay around him as before, but the memory, however fleeting, of the woman's sympathetic smile made him ignore them. He set off in the launch, pushing away the floating birds with brusque motions of the gaff. The picket ship sat at its moorings, the soggy raft of grey corpses around it. For once the rusting hulk depressed Crispin.

As he climbed the gangway he saw Quimby's small figure on the bridge, wild eyes roving about at the sky. Crispin had expressly forbidden the dwarf to be near the steering helm, though there was little likelihood of the picket ship going anywhere. Irritably he shouted at Quimby to get off the ship.

The dwarf leaped down the threadbare network of ratlines to the deck. He scurried over to Crispin.

'Crisp!' he shouted in his hoarse whisper. 'They saw one! Coming in from the coast! Hassell told me to warn you.'

Crispin stopped. Heart pounding, he scanned the sky out of the sides of his eyes, at the same time keeping a close watch on the dwarf. 'When?'

'Yesterday.' The dwarf wriggled one shoulder, as if trying to dislodge a stray memory. 'Or was it this morning? Anyway, it's coming. Are you ready, Crisp?'

Crispin walked past, one hand firmly on the breech of his rifle. 'I'm always ready,' he rejoined. 'What about you?' He jerked a finger at the house. 'You should have been with the woman. Catherine York. I had to help her. She said she didn't want to see you again.'

'What?' The dwarf scurried about, hands dancing along the rusty rail.

He gave up with an elaborate shrug. 'Ah, she's a strange one. Lost her man, you know, Crisp. And her baby.'

Crispin paused at the foot of the bridge companionway. 'Is that right? How did it happen?'

'A dove killed the man, pulled him to pieces on the roof, then took the baby. A tame bird, mark you.' He nodded when Crispin looked at him sceptically. 'That's it. He was another strange one, that York. Kept this big dove on a chain.'

Crispin climbed on to the bridge and stared across the river at the house. After musing to himself for five minutes he kicked Quimby off the ship, and then spent half an hour checking the gunnery installation. The reported sighting of one of the birds he discounted – no doubt a few strays were still flitting about, searching for their flocks – but the vulnerability of the woman across the river reminded him to take every precaution. Near the house she would be relatively safe, but in the open, during her walks along the beach, she would be an all too easy prey.

It was this undefined feeling of responsibility towards Catherine York that prompted him, later that afternoon, to take the launch out again. A quarter of a mile down-river he moored the craft by a large open meadow, directly below the flight path of the birds as they had flown in to attack the picket ship. Here, on the cool green turf, the dying birds had fallen most thickly. A recent fall of rain concealed the odour of the immense gulls and fulmars lying across each other like angels. In the past Crispin had always moved with pride among this white harvest he had reaped from the sky, but now he hurried down the winding aisles between the birds, a wicker basket under his arm, intent only on his errand.

When he reached the higher ground in the centre of the meadow he placed the basket on the carcass of a dead falcon and began to pluck the feathers from the wings and breasts of the birds lying about him. Despite the rain, the plumage was almost dry. Crispin worked steadily for half an hour, tearing out the feathers with his hands, then carried the basketfuls of plumes down to the launch. As he scurried about the meadow his bent head and shoulders were barely visible above the corpses of the birds.

By the time he set off in the launch the small craft was loaded from bow to stern with the bright plumes. Crispin stood in the steering well, peering over his cargo as he drove up-river. He moored the boat on the beach below the woman's house. A thin trail of smoke rose from the fire, and he could hear Mrs York chopping more kindling.

Crispin walked through the shallow water around the boat, selecting the choicest of the plumes and arranging them around the basket – a falcon's brilliant tail feathers, the mother-of-pearl plumes of a fulmar, the brown breast feathers of an eider. Shouldering the basket, he set off towards the house.

Catherine York was moving the trestle closer to the fire, straightening the plumes as the smoke drifted past them. More feathers had been added

to the pyre built on to the frame of the pergola. The outer ones had been woven together to form a firm rim.

Crispin put the basket down in front of her, then stood back. 'Mrs York, I brought these. I thought you might use them.'

The woman glanced obliquely at the sky, then shook her head as if puzzled. Crispin suddenly wondered if she recognized him. 'What are they?'

'Feathers. For over there.' Crispin pointed at the pyre. 'They're the best I could find.'

Catherine York knelt down, her skirt hiding the scuffed sandals. She touched the coloured plumes as if recalling their original owners. 'They are beautiful. Thank you, captain.' She stood up. 'I'd like to keep them, but I need only this kind.'

Crispin followed her hand as she pointed to the white feathers on the trestle. With a curse, he slapped the breech of the rifle.

'Doves! They're all doves! I should have noticed!' He picked up the basket. 'I'll get you some.'

'Crispin . . .' Catherine York took his arm. Her troubled eyes wandered about his face, as if hoping to find some kindly way of warning him off. 'I have enough, thank you. It's nearly finished now.'

Crispin hesitated, waiting for himself to say something to this beautiful white-haired woman whose hands and robe were covered with the soft down of the doves. Then he picked up the basket and made his way back to the launch.

As he sailed across the river to the ship he moved up and down the launch, casting the cargo of feathers on to the water. Behind him, the soft plumes formed a wake.

That night, as Crispin lay in his rusty bunk in the captain's cabin, his dreams of the giant birds who filled the moonlit skies of his sleep were broken by the faint ripple of the air in the rigging overhead, the muffled hoot of an aerial voice calling to itself. Waking, Crispin lay still with his head against the metal stanchion, listening to the faint whoop and swerve around the mast.

Crispin leaped from the bunk. He seized his rifle and raced barefoot up the companionway to the bridge. As he stepped on to the deck, sliding the barrel of the rifle into the air, he caught a last glimpse against the moonlit night of a huge white bird flying away across the river.

Crispin rushed to the rail, trying to steady the rifle enough to get in a shot at the bird. He gave up as it passed beyond his range, its outline masked by the cliff. Once warned, the bird would never return to the ship. A stray, no doubt it was hoping to nest among the masts and rigging.

Shortly before dawn, after a ceaseless watch from the rail, Crispin set off across the river in the launch. Over-excited, he was convinced he had seen it circling above the house. Perhaps it had seen Catherine York asleep through one of the shattered windows. The muffled echo of the engine beat

across the water, broken by the floating forms of the dead birds. Crispin crouched forward with the rifle and drove the launch on to the beach. He ran through the darkened meadow, where the corpses lay like silver shadows. He darted into the cobbled yard and knelt by the kitchen door, trying to catch the sounds of the sleeping woman in the room above.

For an hour, as the dawn lifted over the cliff, Crispin prowled around the house. There were no signs of the bird, but at last he came across the mound of feathers mounted on the pergola frame. Peering into the soft grey bowl, he realized that he had caught the dove in the very act of building a nest.

Careful not to waken the woman sleeping above him beyond the cracked panes, he destroyed the nest. With his rifle butt he stove in the sides, then knocked a hole through the woven bottom. Then, happy that he had saved Catherine York from the nightmare of walking from her house the next morning and seeing the bird waiting to attack her from its perch on this stolen nest, Crispin set off through the gathering light and returned to the ship.

For the next two days, despite his vigil on the bridge, Crispin saw no more of the dove. Catherine York remained within the house, unaware of her escape. At night, Crispin would patrol her house. The changing weather, and the first taste of the winter to come, had unsettled the landscape, and during the day Crispin spent more time upon the bridge, uneager to look out on the marshes that surrounded the ship.

On the night of the storm, Crispin saw the bird again. All afternoon the dark clouds had come in from the sea along the river basin, and by evening the cliff beyond the house was hidden by the rain. Crispin was in the bridge-house, listening to the bulkheads groaning as the ship was driven farther into the mud by the wind.

Lightning flickered across the river, lighting the thousands of corpses in the meadows. Crispin leaned on the helm, gazing at the gaunt reflection of himself in the darkened glass, when a huge white face, beaked like his own, swam into his image. As he stared at this apparition, a pair of immense white wings seemed to unfurl themselves from his shoulders. Then this lost dove, illuminated in a flicker of lightning, rose into the gusting wind around the mast, its wings weaving themselves among the steel cables.

It was still hovering there, trying to find shelter from the rain, when Crispin stepped on to the deck and shot it through the heart.

At first light Crispin left the bridge-house and climbed on to the roof. The dead bird hung, its wings outstretched, in a clutter of steel coils beside the lookout's nest. Its mournful face gaped down at Crispin, its expression barely changed since it loomed out of his own reflection at the height of the storm. Now, as the flat wind faded across the water, Crispin watched the house below the cliff. Against the dark vegetation of the meadows and marshes the bird hung like a white cross, and he waited

for Catherine York to come to a window, afraid that a sudden gust might topple the dove to the deck.

When Quimby arrived in his coracle two hours later, eager to see the bird, Crispin sent him up the mast to secure the dove to the cross-tree. Dancing about beneath the bird, the dwarf seemed mesmerized by Crispin, doing whatever the latter told him.

'Fire a shot at her, Crisp!' he exhorted Crispin, who stood disconsolately by the rail. 'Over the house, that'll bring her out!'

'Do you think so?' Crispin raised the rifle, ejecting the cartridge whose bullet had destroyed the bird. He watched the bright shell tumble down into the feathery water below. 'I don't know . . . it might frighten her. I'll go over there.'

'That's the way, Crisp . . .' The dwarf scuttled about. 'Bring her back here – I'll tidy it up for you.'

'Maybe I will.'

As he berthed the launch on the beach Crispin looked back at the picket ship, reassuring himself that the dead dove was clearly visible in the distance. In the morning sunlight the plumage shone like snow against the rusting masts.

When he neared the house he saw Catherine York standing in the doorway, her wind-blown hair hiding her face, watching him approach with stern eyes.

He was ten yards from her when she stepped into the house and half closed the door. Crispin began to run, and she leaned out and shouted angrily: 'Go away! Go back to the ship and those dead birds you love so much!'

'Miss Catherine . . .' Crispin stammered to a halt by the door. 'I saved you . . . Mrs York!'

'Saved? Save the birds, captain!'

Crispin tried to speak, but she slammed the door. He walked back through the meadow and punted across the river to the picket ship, unaware of Quimby's insane moon eyes staring down at him from the rail.

'Crisp . . . What's the matter?' For once the dwarf was gentle. 'What happened?'

Crispin shook his head. He gazed up at the dead bird, struggling to find some solution to the woman's last retort. 'Quimby,' he said in a quiet voice to the dwarf, 'Quimby, she thinks she's a bird.'

During the next week this conviction grew in Crispin's bewildered mind, as did his obsession with the dead bird. Looming over him like an immense murdered angel, the dove's eyes seemed to follow him about the ship, reminding him of when it had first appeared, almost from within his own face, in the mirror-glass of the bridge-house.

It was this sense of identity with the bird that was to spur Crispin to his final stratagem.

Climbing the mast, he secured himself to the lookout's nest, and with a hacksaw cut away the steel cables tangled around the dove's body. In the gathering wind the great white form of the bird swayed and dipped, its fallen wings almost knocking Crispin from his perch. At intervals the rain beat across them, but the drops helped to wash away the blood on the bird's breast and the chips of rust from the hacksaw. At last Crispin lowered the bird to the deck, then lashed it to the hatch cover behind the funnel.

Exhausted, he slept until the next day. At dawn, armed with a machete, he began to eviscerate the bird.

Three days later, Crispin stood on the cliff above the house, the picket ship far below him across the river. The hollow carcass of the dove which he wore over his head and shoulders seemed little heavier than a pillow. In the brief spell of warm sunlight he lifted the outstretched wings, feeling their buoyancy and the cutting flow of air through the feathers. A few stronger gusts moved across the crest of the ridge, almost lifting him into the wind, and he stepped closer to the small oak which hid him from the house below.

Against the trunk rested his rifle and bandoliers. Crispin lowered the wings and gazed up at the sky, making certain for the last time that no stray hawk or peregrine was about. The effectiveness of the disguise had exceeded all his hopes. Kneeling on the ground, the wings furled at his sides and the hollowed head of the bird lowered over his face, he felt he completely resembled the dove.

Below him the ground sloped towards the house. From the deck of the picket ship the cliff face had seemed almost vertical, but in fact the ground shelved downwards at a steady but gentle gradient. With luck he might even manage to be airborne for a few steps. However, for most of the way to the house he intended simply to run downhill.

As he waited for Catherine York to appear he freed his right arm from the metal clamp he had fastened to the wing bone of the bird. He reached out to set the safety catch on his rifle. By divesting himself of the weapon and his bandoliers, and assuming the disguise of the bird, he had, as he understood, accepted the insane logic of the woman's mind. Yet the symbolic flight he was about to perform would free not only Catherine York, but himself as well, from the spell of the birds.

A door opened in the house, a broken pane of glass catching the sunlight. Crispin stood up behind the oak, his hands bracing themselves on the wings. Catherine York appeared, carrying something across the yard. She paused by the rebuilt nest, her white hair lifting in the breeze, and adjusted some of the feathers.

Stepping from behind the tree, Crispin walked forward down the slope. Ten yards ahead he reached a patch of worn turf. He began to run, the wings flapping unevenly at his sides. As he gained speed his feet raced across the ground. Suddenly the wings steadied as they gained their

purchase on the updraught, and he found himself able to glide, the air rushing past his face.

He was a hundred yards from the house when the woman noticed him. A few moments later, when she had brought her shotgun from the kitchen, Crispin was too busy trying to control the speeding glider in which he had become a confused but jubilant passenger. His voice cried out as he soared across the falling ground, feet leaping in ten-yard strides, the smell of the bird's blood and plumage filling his lungs.

He reached the perimeter of the meadow that ringed the house, crossing the hedge fifteen feet above the ground. He was holding with one hand to the soaring carcass of the dove, his head half-lost inside the skull, when the woman fired twice at him. The first charge went through the tail, but the second shot hit him in the chest, down into the soft grass of the meadow among the dead birds.

Half an hour later, when she saw that Crispin had died, Catherine York walked forward to the twisted carcass of the dove and began to pluck away the choicest plumes, carrying them back to the nest which she was building again for the great bird that would come one day and bring back her son.

1966

TOMORROW IS A MILLION YEARS

In the evening the time-winds would blow across the Sea of Dreams, and the silver wreck of the excursion module would loom across the jewelled sand to where Glanville lay in the pavilion by the edge of the reef. During the first week after the crash, when he could barely move his head, he had seen the images of the *Santa Maria* and the *Golden Hind* sailing towards him through the copper sand, the fading light of the sunset illuminating the ornamental casements of the high stern-castles. Later, sitting up in the surgical chair, he had seen the spectral crews of these spectral ships, their dark figures watching him from the quarter-decks. Once, when he could walk again, Glanville went out on to the surface of the lake, his wife guiding his elbow as he hobbled on his stick. Two hundred yards from the module he had suddenly seen an immense ship materialize from the wreck and move through the sand towards them, its square sails lifted by the time-winds. In the cerise light Glanville recognized the two bow anchors jutting like tusks, the tryworks amidships, and the whaling irons and harpoons. Judith held his arm, drawing him back to the pavilion, but Glanville knocked away her hand.

Rolling slowly, the great ship crested silently through the sand, its hull towering above them as if they had been watching from a skiff twenty yards off its starboard bow. As it swept by with a faint sigh of sand, the whisper of the time-winds, Glanville pointed to the three men looking down at them from the quarter-rail, the tallest with stern eyes and a face like biscuit, the second jaunty, the third ruddy and pipe-smoking.

'Can you see them?' Glanville shouted. 'Starbuck, Stubb and Flask, the mates of the *Pequod*!' Glanville pointed to the helm, where a wild-eyed old man gazed at the edge of the reef on which he seemed collision-bent. 'Ahab . . . !' he cried in warning. But the ship had reached the reef, and then in an instant faded across the clinker-like rocks, its mizzen-sail lit for a last moment by the dying light.

'The *Pequod*! My God, you could see the crew, Ishmael and Tashtego . . . Ahab was there, and the mates, Melville's three momentous men! Did you see them, Judith?'

His wife nodded, helping him on towards the pavilion, her frown hidden in the dusk light. Glanville knew perfectly well that she never saw the spectral ships, but nonetheless she seemed to sense that something vast and strange moved across the sand-lake out of the time-winds. For the moment, she was more interested in making certain that he recovered

from the long flight and the absurd accident when the excursion module had crashed on landing.

'But why the *Pequod*?' Glanville asked, as they sat in their chairs on the veranda of the pavilion. He mopped his plump, unshaven face with a flowered handkerchief. 'The *Golden Hind* and the *Santa Maria*, yes . . . ships of discovery; Drake circumnavigating the globe has a certain resemblance to ourselves half-crossing the universe – but Crusoe's ship would have been more appropriate, don't you agree?'

'Why?' Judith glanced at the sand inundating the slatted metal floor of the veranda. She filled her glass with soda from the siphon, and then played with the sparkling fluid, watching the bubbles with her severe eyes. 'Because we're marooned?'

'No . . .' Irritated by his wife's reply, Glanville turned to face her. Sometimes her phlegmatic attitude annoyed him – she seemed almost to enjoy deflating his mood of optimism, however forced that might be. 'What I meant was that Crusoe, like ourselves here, made a new world for himself out of the pieces of the old he brought with him. We can do the same, Judith.' He paused, wondering how to re-assert his physical authority, and then said with quiet emphasis: 'We're not marooned.'

His wife nodded, her long face expressionless. Barely moving her head, she looked up at the night sky visible beyond the edge of the awning. High above them, a single point of light traversed the starless sky, its intermittent beacon punctuating its way towards the northern pole. 'No, we're not marooned – not for long, anyway, with that up there. It won't be long at all before Captain Thornwald catches up with us.'

Glanville stared into the bottom of his glass. Unlike his wife, he took little pleasure in the sight of the automatic emergency beacon of the control ship broadcasting their position to the universe at large. 'He'll catch up with us, all right. That's the luck of the thing. Instead of having him always at our heels we'll finally be free of him for ever. They won't send anyone after Thornwald.'

'Perhaps not.' Judith tapped the metal table. 'But how do you propose to get rid of him – don't tell me you're going to be locked together in mortal combat? At the moment you can hardly move one foot after the other.'

Glanville smiled, with an effort ignoring the sarcasm in his wife's voice. Whatever the qualities of skill, shrewdness and even courage, of a kind, that had brought them here, she still regarded him as something of an obscure joke. At times he wondered whether it would have been better to have left her behind. Alone here, on this lost world, he would have had no one to remind him of his sagging, middle-aged figure, his little indecisions and fantasies. He would have been able to sit back in front of the long sunsets and enjoy the strange poetry of the Sea of Dreams.

However, once he had disposed of Captain Thornwald she might at last take him seriously. 'Don't worry, there'll be no mortal combat – we'll let the time-winds blow over him.'

Undeterred, Judith said: 'You'll let one of your spectral ships run him down? But perhaps he won't see them.'

Glanville gazed out at the dark grottoes of the sand-reef that fringed the northern shore of the lake two miles away. Despite its uniformity – the lake-systems covered the entire planet – the flat perspectives of the landscape fascinated him. 'It doesn't matter whether he sees them or not. By the way, the *Pequod* this evening . . . it's a pity you missed Ahab. They were all there, exactly as Melville described them in *Moby Dick*.'

His wife stood up, as if aware that he might begin one of his rhapsodies again. She brushed away the white sand that lay like lace across the blue brocade of her gown. 'I hope you're right. Perhaps you'll see the *Flying Dutchman* next.'

Distracted by his thoughts, Glanville watched her tall figure move away across the gradient of the beach, following the tide-line formed by the sand blown off the lake's surface. The *Flying Dutchman*? A curious remark. By coming to this remote planet they themselves would lose seven years of their lives by time-dilation if they ever chose to return home, by coincidence the period that elapsed while the condemned Dutchman roved the seas . . . Every seven years he would come ashore, free to stay there only if he found the love of a faithful woman.

Was he himself the Dutchman? Perhaps, in a remote sense. Or Thornwald? He and Judith had met during the preliminary inquiries and, incredible though it seemed, there might have been something between them – it was difficult to believe that Thornwald would have pursued them this far, sacrificing all hopes of seniority and promotion, over a minor emigration infringement. The bacterial scattering might be serious on some planets, but they had restricted themselves to arid worlds on an empty edge of the universe.

Glanville looked out at the wreck of the excursion module. For a moment there was a glimmer of royals and top-gallants, as if the entire *Cutty Sark* was about to disgorge itself from the sand. This strange phenomenon, a consequence of the time-sickness brought on by the vast distances of interstellar space, had revealed itself more and more during their long flight. The farther they penetrated into deep space, the greater the nostalgia of the human mind and its eagerness to transform any man-made objects, such as the spaceships in which they travelled, into their archaic forebears. Judith, for some reason, had been immune, but Glanville had seen a succession of extraordinary visions, fragments of the myths and dreams of the Earth's past, reborn out of the dead lakes and fossil seas of the alien worlds.

Judith, of course, not only lacked all imagination but felt no sense of guilt – Glanville's crime, the memory of which he had almost completely repressed, was no responsibility of hers, man and wife though they might be. Besides, the failures of which she silently accused him every day were those of character, more serious in her eyes than embezzlement, grand larceny or even murder. It was precisely this that made possible his plan to deal once and for all with Captain Thornwald.

* * *

Three weeks later, when Thornwald arrived, Glanville had recovered completely from the accident. From the top of the sand-reef overhanging the western edge of the lake he watched the police captain's capsule land two hundred yards from the pavilion. Judith stood under the awning on the veranda, one hand raised to ward off the dust kicked up by the retro-jets. She had never questioned Glanville's strategy for dealing with Thornwald, but now and then he had noticed her glancing upwards at the beacon of the control ship, as if calculating the number of days it would take Thornwald to catch up with them. Glanville was surprised by her patience. Once, a week before Thornwald arrived, he almost challenged her to say whether she really believed he would be able to outwit the police captain. By a curious irony, he realized that she probably did but if so, why did she still despise him?

As the starboard hatch of the capsule fell back, Glanville stood up on the edge of the reef and began to wave with both arms. He made his way down the side of the reef, then jumped the last five feet to the lake floor and ran across to the capsule. 'Thornwald! Captain, it's good to see you!'

Framed within the steel collar of his suit, the policeman's tired face looked up at Glanville through the open hatch. He stood up with an effort and accepted Glanville's hand, then climbed down on to the ground. Careful not to turn his back on Glanville, he unzipped his suit and glanced quickly at the pavilion and the wreck of the excursion module.

Glanville strolled to and fro around him. Thornwald's cautious manner, the hand near the weapon in his holster, for some reason amused him. 'Captain, you made a superb landing, beautiful marksmanship – getting here at all, for that matter. You saw the beacon, I suppose, but even so . . .' When Thornwald was about to speak, Glanville rattled on: 'No, of course I didn't leave it on deliberately – damn it, we actually crashed! Can you imagine it, after coming all this way – very nearly broke our necks. Luckily, Judith was all right, not a scratch on her. She'll be glad to see you, Captain.'

Thornwald nodded slowly, his eyes following Glanville's pudgy, sweating figure as it roved about the capsule. A tall, stooped man with a tough, pessimistic face and all the wariness of a long-serving policeman, he seemed somehow unsettled by Glanville's manic gaiety.

Glanville pointed to the pavilion. 'Come on, we'll have lunch, you must be tired out.' He gestured at the sand-lake and the blank sky. 'Nothing much here, I know, but it's restful. After a few days –'

'Glanville!' Thornwald stopped. Face set, he put a hand out as if to touch Glanville's shoulder. 'You realize why I'm here?'

'Of course, Captain.' Glanville gave him an easy smile. 'For heaven's sake, stop looking so serious. I'm not going to escape. There's nowhere to go.'

'As long as you realize that.' Thornwald plodded forward through the top surface of fine sand, his feet placed carefully as if testing the validity of

this planet with its euphoric tenant. 'You can have something to eat, then we'll get ready to go back.'

'If you like, Captain. Still, there's no desperate hurry. Seven years here and back, what difference will a few hours or even days make? All those whipper-snappers you left behind you in the department will be chief commissioners now; I wouldn't be in too much of a hurry. Besides, the emigration laws may even have been changed . . .'

Thornwald nodded dourly. Glanville was about to introduce him to Judith, standing quietly on the veranda twenty feet from him, but suddenly Thornwald stopped and glanced across the lake, as if searching for an invisible marksman hidden among the reefs.

'All right?' Glanville asked. Changing the pitch and tempo of his voice, he remarked quietly: 'I call it the Sea of Dreams. We're a long way from home, Captain, remember that. There are strange visions here at sunset. Keep your back turned on them.' He waved at Judith, who was watching them approach with pursed lips. 'Captain Thornwald, my dear. Rescue at last.'

'Of a kind.' She faced Thornwald who stood beside Glanville, as if hesitating to enter the pavilion. 'I hope you feel all this is necessary, Captain. Revenge is a poor motive for justice.'

Glanville cleared his throat. 'Well, yes, my dear, but . . . Come on, Captain, sit down, we'll have a drink. Judith, could you . . . ?

After a pause she nodded and went into the pavilion.

Glanville made a temporizing gesture. 'A difficult moment, Captain. But as you know, Judith was always rather headstrong.'

Thornwald nodded, watching Glanville as the latter drew the chair around the table. He pointed to the wreck of the excursion module. 'How badly was it damaged? We'll have a look at it later.'

'A waste of time, Captain. It's a complete write-off.'

Thornwald scrutinized the wreck. 'Even so, I'll want to decontaminate it before we leave.'

'Isn't that pointless? – no one will ever come here. The whole planet is dead. Anyway, there's a good deal of fuel in the tanks; if you short a circuit with your sprays the whole thing could go up.' Glanville looked around impatiently. 'Where are those drinks? Judith is . . .'

He started to stand up, and found Thornwald following him to the door of the pavilion. 'It's all right, Captain.'

Thornwald leaned stolidly on the door. He looked down at Glanville's plump, sweating face. 'Let me help you.'

Glanville shrugged and beckoned him forward, but then stopped. 'Captain, for heaven's sake! If I wanted to escape I wouldn't have been waiting for you here. Believe me, I haven't got a gun hidden away in a whisky bottle or something – I just don't want a scene between you and Judith.'

Thornwald nodded, then waited in the doorway. When Glanville returned with the tray he went back to his seat, eyes searching the pavilion and the surrounding beach as if looking for a missing element

in a puzzle. 'Glanville, I have to prefer charges against you – you're aware what you face when you get back?'

Glanville shrugged. 'Of course. But after all, the offence was comparatively trivial, wasn't it?' He reached for Thornwald's bulky flight-suit which was spread across the veranda-rail. 'Let me move this out of the sun. Where's Judith gone?'

As Thornwald glanced at the door of the pavilion Glanville reached down to the steel pencil in the right knee of the suit. He withdrew it from the slot, then deliberately dropped it to the metal floor.

'What's this?' he asked. 'A torch?' His thumb pushed back the nozzle and then moved quickly to the spring tab.

'Don't press that!' Thornwald was on his feet. 'It's a radio reflector, you'll fill the place with –' He reached across the table and tried to grasp it from Glanville, then flung up his forearm to protect his face.

A blinding jet of vaporized aluminium suddenly erupted from the nozzle of Glanville's hand, gushing out like a firework. Within two or three seconds its spangled cloud filled the veranda, painting the walls and ceiling. Thornwald kicked aside the table and buried his face in his hands, his hair and forehead covered with the silver paint.

Glanville backed to the steps, flecks of the paint spattering his arms and chest, hosing the jet directly at the policeman. He tossed the canister on to the floor, where its last spurts gusted out into the sunlight, swept up by the convection currents like a swarm of fireflies. Then, head down, Glanville turned and ran towards the edge of the sand-reef fifty yards away.

Two hours later, as he crouched deep in the grottoes of the reef on the west shore of the lake, Glanville watched with amusement as Thornwald's silver-painted figure stepped out of the pavilion into the sunlight. The cloud of vapour above the pavilion had settled, and the drab grey panels of the roof and sides were now a brilliant aluminized silver, shining in the sunlight like a temple. Framed in the doorway was Judith, watching as Thornwald walked slowly towards his capsule. Apart from the two clear handprints across his face, his entire body was covered with the aluminium particles. His hair glittered in the sunlight like silver foil.

'Glanville . . . !' Thornwald's voice, slightly querulous, echoed in the galleries of the reef. The flap of his holster was open, but the weapon still lay within its sheath, and Glanville guessed that he had no intention of trying to track him through the galleries and corridors of the reef. The columns of fused sand could barely support their own weight; every few hours there would be a dull eruption as one or other of the great pillar-systems collapsed into a cloud of dust.

Grinning to himself, Glanville watched Thornwald glance back at the pavilion. Evidently intrigued by this duel between the two men, Judith had sat down on the veranda, watching like some mediaeval lady at a tourney.

The police captain moved towards the reef, his legs stiff and awkward, as if self-conscious of his glittering form. Chortling, Glanville scraped the sand from the curved reef over his head and rubbed it into the flecks of

silver paint on his sleeves and trousers. As he drank from the flask of water he had hidden in the reef three days earlier, he glanced at his watch. It was nearly three o'clock – within four hours phantoms would move across the sand-lake. He patted the parcel wrapped in grey plastic sheeting on the ledge beside him.

At seven o'clock the time-winds began to blow across the Sea of Dreams. As the sun fell away behind the western ridges, the long shadows of the sand-reefs crossed the lake-floor, dimming the quartz-veins as if closing off a maze of secret pathways.

Crouched at the foot of the reef, Glanville edged along the beach, his sand-smeared figure barely visible in the darkness. Four hundred yards away, Thornwald sat alone on the veranda of the pavilion, his silver figure illuminated in the last cerise rays of the sun. Watching him across the lake-bed, Glanville assumed that already the timewinds were moving towards him, carrying strange images of ships and phantom seas, perhaps of mermaids and hallucinatory monsters. Thornwald sat stiffly in his chair, one hand on the rail in front of him.

Glanville moved along the beach, picking his way between the veins of frosted quartz. As the wreck of the excursion module and the smaller capsule near by came between himself and the pavilion, he began to see the faint outlines of a low-hulled ship, a schooner or brigantine, with its sails reefed, as if waiting at anchor in some pirate lagoon. Ignoring it, Glanville crept into a shallow fault that crossed the lake, its floor some three feet below the surrounding surface. Catching his breath, he undid the parcel, then carried the object inside it under one arm as he set off towards the glimmering wreck of the module.

Twenty minutes later Glanville stepped out from his vantage point behind the excursion module. Around him rode the spectral hulks of two square-sailed ships, their bows dipping through the warm sand. Intent on the pavilion ahead of him, where the silver figure of Thornwald had stood up like an electrified ghost, Glanville stepped through the translucent image of an anchor-cable that curved down into the surface of the lake in front of him. Holding the object he had taken from the parcel above his head like a lantern, he walked steadily towards the pavilion.

The hulls of the ships rode silently at their anchors behind him as he reached the edge of the lake. Thirty yards away, the silver paint around the pavilion speckled the sand with a sheen of false moonlight, but the remainder of the beach and lake were in a profound darkness. As he walked the last yards to the pavilion with a slow rhythmic stride, Glanville could see clearly Thornwald's tall figure pressed against the wall of the veranda, his appalled face, in the shape of his own hands, staring at the apparition in front of him. As Glanville reached the steps Thornwald made a passive gesture at him, one hand raised towards the pistol lying on the table.

Quickly, Glanville threw aside the object he had carried with him. He seized the pistol before Thornwald could move, then whispered, more to

himself than to Thornwald: 'Strange seas, Captain, I warned you . . .' He crouched down and began to back away along the veranda, the pistol levelled at Thornwald's chest.

Then the door on his left opened and before he could move the translucent figure of his wife stepped from the interior of the pavilion and knocked the weapon from his hand.

He turned to her angrily, then shouted at the headless spectre that stepped through him and strode off towards the dark ships moored in the centre of the lake.

Two hours after dawn the next morning Captain Thornwald finished his preparations for departure. In the last minutes he stood on the veranda, gazing out at the even sunlight over the empty lake as he wiped away the last traces of the aluminium paint with a solvent sponge. He looked down at the seated figure of Glanville tied to the chair by the table. Despite the events of the previous night, Glanville now seemed composed and relaxed, a trace even of humour playing about his soft mouth.

Something about this bizarre amiability made Thornwald shudder. He secured the pistol in his holster – another evening by this insane lake and he would be pointing it at his own head.

'Captain . . .' Glanville glanced at him with docile eyes, then shrugged his fat shoulders inside the ropes. 'When are you going to untie these? We'll be leaving soon.'

Thornwald threw the sponge on to the silver sand below the pavilion. '*I'll* be going soon, Glanville. You're staying here.' When Glanville began to protest, he said: 'I don't think there's much point in your leaving. As you said, you've built your own little world here.'

'But . . .' Glanville searched the captain's face. 'Frankly, Thornwald, I can't understand you. Why did you come here in the first place, then? Where's Judith, by the way? She's around here somewhere.'

Thornwald paused, steeling himself against the name and the memory of the previous night. 'Yes, she's around here, all right.' As if testing some unconscious element of Glanville's memory, he said clearly: 'She's in the module, as a matter of fact.'

'The module?' Glanville pulled at his ropes, then squinted over his shoulder into the sunlight. 'But I told her not to go there. When's she coming back?'

'She'll be back, don't worry. This evening, I imagine, when the time-winds blow, though I don't want to be here when she comes. This sea of yours had bad dreams, Glanville.'

'What do you mean?'

Thornwald walked across the veranda. 'Glanville, have you any idea why I'm here, why I've hunted you all this way?'

'God only knows – something to do with the emigration laws.'

'Emigration laws?' Thornwald shook his head. 'Any charges there would be minor.' After a pause, he said: 'Murder, Glanville.'

Glanville looked up with real surprise. 'Murder? You're out of your mind! Of whom, for heaven's sake?'

Thornwald patted the raw skin around his chin. The pale image of his hands still clung to his face. 'Of your wife.'

'Judith? But she's here, you idiot! You saw her yourself when you arrived!'

'*You* saw her, Glanville. I didn't. But I realized that you'd brought her here with you when you started playing her part, using that mincing crazy voice of yours. You weren't very keen on my going out to the module. Then, last night, you brought something from it for me.'

Thornwald walked across the veranda, averting his eyes from the wreck of the module. He remembered the insane vision he had seen the previous evening as he sat watching for Glanville, waiting for this madman who had absconded with the body of his murdered wife. The time-winds had carried across to him the image of a spectral ship whose rotting timbers had formed a strange portcullis in the evening sun – a dungeon-grate. Then, suddenly, he had seen a terrifying apparition walking across this sea of blood towards him, the nightmare commander of this ship of Hell, a tall woman with the slow rhythmic stride of his own requiem. '*Her locks were yellow as gold . . . the nightmare life-in-death was she, who thicks man's blood with cold.*' Aghast at the sight of Judith's head on this lamia, he had barely recognized Glanville, her mad Mariner, bearing her head like a wild lantern before he snatched the pistol.

Glanville flexed his shoulders against the ropes. 'Captain, I don't know about Judith . . . she's not too happy here, and we've never got on with just ourselves for company. I'd like to come with you.'

'I'm sorry, Glanville, there's not much point – you're in the right place here.'

'But, Captain, aren't you exceeding your authority? If there is a murder charge . . .'

'Not "captain", Glanville – "commissioner". I was promoted before I left, and that gives me absolute discretion in these cases. I think this planet is remote enough; no one's likely to come here and disturb you.'

He went over to Glanville and looked down at him, then took a clasp knife from his pocket and laid it on the table. 'You should be able to get a hand around that if you stand up. Goodbye, Glanville, I'll leave you here in your gilded hell.'

'But Thornwald . . . Commissioner!' Glanville swung himself round in the chair. 'Where's Judith? Call her.'

Thornwald glanced back across the sunlight. 'I can't, Glanville. But you'll see her soon. This evening, when the time-winds blow, they'll bring her back to you, a dead woman from the dead sea.'

He set off towards the capsule across the jewelled sand.

THE ASSASSINATION OF JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY CONSIDERED AS A DOWNHILL MOTOR RACE

Author's note. – The assassination of President Kennedy on November 22nd, 1963, raised many questions, not all of which were answered by the Report of the Warren Commission. It is suggested that a less conventional view of the events of that grim day may provide a more satisfactory explanation. In particular, Alfred Jarry's The Crucifixion Considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race *gives us a useful lead.*

Oswald was the starter.

From his window above the track he opened the race by firing the starting gun. It is believed that the first shot was not properly heard by all the drivers. In the following confusion Oswald fired the gun two more times, but the race was already under way.

Kennedy got off to a bad start.

There was a governor in his car and its speed remained constant at about fifteen miles an hour. However, shortly afterwards, when the governor had been put out of action, the car accelerated rapidly, and continued at high speed along the remainder of the course.

The visiting teams. As befitting the inauguration of the first production car race through the streets of Dallas, both the President and the Vice-President participated. The Vice-President, Johnson, took up his position behind Kennedy on the starting line. The concealed rivalry between the two men was of keen interest to the crowd. Most of them supported the home driver, Johnson.

The starting point was the Texas Book Depository, where all bets were placed on the Presidential race. Kennedy was an unpopular contestant with the Dallas crowd, many of whom showed outright hostility. The deplorable incident familiar to us all is one example.

The course ran downhill from the Book Depository, below an overpass, then onto the Parkland Hospital and from there to Love Air Field. It is one of the most hazardous courses in downhill motor-racing, second only to the Sarajevo track discontinued in 1914.

Kennedy went downhill rapidly. After the damage to the governor the car shot forward at high speed. An alarmed track official attempted to mount the car, which continued on its way, cornering on two wheels.

Turns. Kennedy was disqualified at the Hospital, after taking a turn for the worse. Johnson now continued the race in the lead, which he maintained to the finish.

The flag. To signify the participation of the President in the race Old Glory was used in place of the usual chequered square. Photographs of Johnson receiving his prize after winning the race reveal that he had decided to make the flag a memento of his victory.

Previously, Johnson had been forced to take a back seat, as his position on the starting line behind the President indicates. Indeed, his attempts to gain a quick lead on Kennedy during the false start were forestalled by a track steward, who pushed Johnson to the floor of his car.

In view of the confusion at the start of the race, which resulted in Kennedy, clearly expected to be the winner on past form, being forced to drop out at the Hospital turn, it has been suggested that the hostile local crowd, eager to see a win by the home driver Johnson, deliberately set out to stop him completing the race. Another theory maintains that the police guarding the track were in collusion with the starter, Oswald. After he finally managed to give the send-off Oswald immediately left the race, and was subsequently apprehended by track officials.

Johnson had certainly not expected to win the race in this way. There were no pit stops.

Several puzzling aspects of the race remain. One is the presence of the President's wife in the car, an unusual practice for racing drivers. Kennedy, however, may have maintained that as he was in control of the ship of state he was therefore entitled to captain's privileges.

The Warren Commission. The rake-off on the book of the race. In their report, prompted by widespread complaints of foul play and other irregularities, the syndicate laid full blame on the starter, Oswald.

Without doubt Oswald badly misfired. But one question still remains unanswered: who loaded the starting gun?

1966

CRY HOPE, CRY FURY!

Again last night, as the dusk air moved across the desert from Vermilion Sands, I saw the faint shiver of rigging among the reefs, a topmast moving like a silver lantern through the rock spires. Watching from the veranda of my beach-house, I followed its course towards the open sand-sea, and saw the spectral sails of this spectral ship. Each evening I had seen the same yacht, this midnight schooner that slipped its secret moorings and rolled across the painted sea. Last night a second yacht set off in pursuit from its hiding place among the reefs, at its helm a pale-haired steerswoman with the eyes of a sad Medea. As the two yachts fled across the sand-sea I remembered when I had first met Hope Cunard, and her strange affair with the Dutchman, Charles Rademaeker . . .

Every summer during the season at Vermilion Sands, when the town was full of tourists and avant-garde film companies, I would close my office and take one of the beach-houses by the sand-sea five miles away at Ciraquito. Here the long evenings made brilliant sunsets of the sky and desert, crossing the sails of the sand-yachts with hieroglyphic shadows, signatures of all the strange ciphers of the desert sea. During the day I would take my yacht, a Bermuda-rigged sloop, and sail towards the dunes of the open desert. The strong thermals swept me along on a wake of gilded sand.

Hunting for rays, I sometimes found myself carried miles across the desert, beyond sight of the coastal reefs that presided like eroded deities over the hierarchies of sand and wind. I would drive on after a fleeing school of rays, firing the darts into the overheated air and losing myself in an abstract landscape composed of the flying rays, the undulating dunes and the triangles of the sails. Out of these materials, the barest geometry of time and space, came the bizarre figures of Hope Cunard and her retinue, like illusions born of that sea of dreams.

One morning I set out early to hunt down a school of white sand-rays I had seen far across the desert the previous day. For hours I moved over the firm sand, avoiding the sails of other yachtsmen, my only destination the horizon. By noon I was beyond sight of any landmarks, but I had found the white rays and sped after them through the rising dunes. The twenty rays flew on ahead, as if leading me to some unseen destination.

The dunes gave way to a series of walled plains crossed by quartz veins.

Skirting a wide ravine whose ornamented mouth gaped like the door of a half-submerged cathedral, I felt the yacht slide to one side, a puncture in its starboard tyre. The air seemed to gild itself around me as I lowered the sail.

Kicking the flaccid tyre, I took stock of the landscape – submerged sand-reefs, an ocean of dunes, and the shell of an abandoned yacht half a mile away near the jagged mouth of a quartz vein that glittered at me like the jaws of a jewelled crocodile. I was twenty miles from the coast and my only supplies were a vacuum flask of iced Martini in the sail locker.

The rays, directed by some mysterious reflex, had also paused, settling on the crest of a nearby dune. Arming myself with the spear-gun, I set off towards the wreck, hoping to find a pump in its locker.

The sand was like powdered glass. Six hundred yards further on, when the raffia soles had been cut from my shoes, I turned back. Rather than exhaust myself, I decided to rest in the shade of the mainsail and walk back to Ciraquito when darkness came. Behind me, my feet left bloody prints in the sand.

I was sitting against the mast, bathing my torn feet in the cold Martini, when a large white ray appeared in the air overhead. Detaching itself from the others, who sat quietly on a distant crest, it had come back to inspect me. With wings fully eight feet wide, and a body as large as a man's, it flew monotonously around me as I sipped at the last of the lukewarm Martini. Despite its curiosity, the creature showed no signs of wanting to attack me.

Ten minutes later, when it still circled overhead, I took the spear-gun from the locker and shot it through its left eye. Transfixed by the steel bolt, its crashing form drove downwards into the sail, tearing it from the mast, and plunged through the rigging on to the deck. Its wing struck my head like a blow from the sky.

For hours I lay in the empty sand-sea, burned by the air, the giant ray my dead companion. Time seemed suspended at an unchanging noon, the sky full of mock suns, but it was probably in the early afternoon when I felt an immense shadow fall across the yacht. I lifted myself over the corpse beside me as a huge sand-schooner, its silver bowsprit as long as my own craft, moved through the sand on its white tyres. Their faces hidden by their dark glasses, the crew watched me from the helm.

Standing with one hand on the cabin rail, the brass portholes forming haloes at her feet, was a tall, narrow-hipped woman with blonde hair so pale she immediately reminded me of the Ancient Mariner's Nightmare Life-in-Death. Her eyes gazed at me like dark magnolias. Lifted by the wind, her opal hair, like antique silver, made a chasuble of the air.

Unsure whether this strange craft and its crew were an apparition, I raised the empty Martini flask to the woman. She looked down at me with eyes crossed by disappointment. Two members of the crew ran over to me. As they pulled the body of the sand-ray off my legs

I stared at their faces. Although smooth-shaven and sunburnt, they resembled masks.

This was my rescue by Hope Cunard. Resting in the cabin below, while one of the crew wrapped the wounds on my feet, I could see her pale-haired figure through the glass roof. Her preoccupied face gazed across the desert as if searching for some far more important quarry than myself.

She came into the cabin half an hour later. She sat down on the bunk at my feet, touching the white plaster with a curious hand.

'Robert Melville – are you a poet? You were talking about the Ancient Mariner when we found you.'

I gestured vaguely. 'It was a joke. On myself.' I could hardly tell this remote but beautiful young woman that I had first seen her as Coleridge's nightmare witch, and added: 'I killed a sand-ray that was circling my yacht.'

She played with the jade pendants lying in emerald pools in the folds of her white dress. Her eyes presided over her pensive face like troubled birds. Apparently taking my reference to the Mariner with complete seriousness, she said: 'You can rest at Lizard Key until you're better. My brother will mend your yacht for you. I'm sorry about the rays – they mistook you for someone else.'

As she sat there, staring through the porthole, the great schooner swept silently over the jewelled sand, the white rays moving a few feet above the ground in our wake. Later I realized that they had brought back the wrong prey for their mistress.

Within two hours we reached Lizard Key where I was to stay for the next three weeks. Rising out of the thermal rollers, the island seemed to float upon the air, the villa with its terrace and jetty barely visible in the haze. Surrounded on three sides by the tall minarets of the sand-reefs, both villa and island had sprung from some mineral fantasy of the desert. Rock spires rose beside the pathway to the villa like cypresses, pieces of wild sculpture growing around them.

'When my father first found the island it was full of gila monsters and basilisks,' Hope explained as I was helped up the pathway. 'We come here every summer now to sail and paint.'

At the terrace we were greeted by the two other tenants of this private paradise – Hope Cunard's half-brother, Foyle, a young man with white hair brushed forward over his forehead, a heavy mouth and pocked cheeks, who stared down at me from the balcony like some moody beach Hamlet; and Hope's secretary, Barbara Quimby, a plain-faced sphinx in a black bikini with bored eyes like two-way mirrors.

Together they watched me being brought up the steps behind Hope. The look of expectancy on their faces changed to polite indifference the moment I was introduced. Almost before Hope could finish describing my rescue they wandered off to the beach-chairs at the end of the terrace.

During the next few days, as I lay on a divan near by, I had more time to examine this strange menage. Despite their dependence upon Hope, who had inherited the island villa from her father, their attitude seemed to be that of palace conspirators, with their private humour and secret glances. Hope, however, was unaware of these snide asides. Like the atmosphere within the villa itself, her personality lacked all focus and her real attention was elsewhere.

Whom had Foyle and Barbara Quimby expected Hope to bring back? What navigator of the sand-sea was Hope Cunard searching for in her schooner with her flock of white rays? To begin with I saw little of her, though now and then she would stand on the roof of her studio and feed the rays that flew across to her from their eyries in the rock spires. Each morning she sailed off in the schooner, her opal-haired figure with its melancholy gaze scanning the desert sea. The afternoons she spent alone in her studio, working on her paintings. She made no effort to show me any of her work, but in the evenings, as the four of us had dinner together, she would stare at me over her liqueur as if seeing my profile within one of her paintings.

'Shall I do a portrait of you, Robert?' she asked one morning. 'I see you as the Ancient Mariner, with a white ray around your neck.'

I covered the plaster on my feet with the dragon-gold dressing gown – left behind, I assumed, by one of her lovers. 'Hope, you're making a myth out of me. I'm sorry I killed one of your rays, but believe me, I did it without thinking.'

'So did the Mariner.' She moved around me, one hand on hip, the other touching my lips and chin as if feeling the contours of some antique statue. 'I'll do a portrait of you reading Maldoror.'

The previous evening I had treated them to an extended defence of the surrealists, showing off for Hope and ignoring Foyle's bored eyes as he lounged on his heavy elbows. Hope had listened closely, as if unsure of my real identity.

As I looked at the empty surface of the fresh canvas she ordered to be brought down from her studio, I wondered what image of me would emerge from its blank pigments. Like all paintings produced at Vermilion Sands at that time, it would not actually need the exercise of the painter's hand. Once the pigments had been selected, the photosensitive paint would produce an image of whatever still life or landscape it was exposed to. Although a lengthy process, requiring an exposure of at least four or five days, it had the immense advantage that there was no need for the subject's continuous presence. Given a few hours each day, the photosensitive pigments would anneal themselves into the contours of a likeness.

This discontinuity was responsible for the entire charm and magic of these paintings. Instead of a mere photographic replica, the movements of the sitter produced a series of multiple projections, perhaps with the

analytic forms of cubism, or, less severely, a pleasant impressionistic blurring. However, these unpredictable variations on the face and form of the sitter were often disconcerting in their perception of character. The running of outlines, or separation of tonalities, could reveal tell-tale lines in the texture of skin and features, or generate strange swirls in the sitter's eyes like the epileptic spirals in the last demented landscapes of Van Gogh. These unfortunate effects were all too easily reinforced by any nervous or anticipatory movements of the sitter.

The likelihood that my own portrait would reveal more of my feelings for Hope than I cared to admit occurred to me as the canvas was set up in the library. I lay back stiffly on the sofa, waiting for the painting to be exposed, when Hope's half-brother appeared, a second canvas between his outstretched hands.

'My dear sister, you've always refused to sit for me.' When Hope started to protest Foyle brushed her aside. 'Melville, do you realize that she's never sat for a portrait in her life! Why, Hope? Don't tell me you're frightened of the canvas? Let's see you at last in your true guise.'

'Guise?' Hope looked up at him with wary eyes. 'What are you playing at, Foyle? That canvas isn't a witch's mirror.'

'Of course not, Hope.' Foyle smiled at her. 'All it can tell is the truth. Don't you agree, Barbara?'

Her eyes hidden behind her dark glasses, Miss Quimby nodded promptly. 'Absolutely. Miss Cunard, it will be fascinating to see what comes out. I'm sure you'll be very beautiful.'

'Beautiful?' Hope stared down at the canvas resting at Foyle's feet. For the first time she seemed to be making a conscious effort to take command of herself and the villa at Lizard Key. Then, accepting Foyle's challenge, and refusing to be outfaced by his broken-lipped sneer, she said: 'All right, Foyle. I'll sit for you. My first portrait – you may be surprised what it sees in me.'

Little did we realize what nightmare fish would swim to the surface of these mirrors.

During the next few days our portraits emerged like pale ghosts from the paintings. Each afternoon I would see Hope in the library, when she would sit for her portrait and listen to me reading from Maldoror, but already she was only interested in watching the deserted sand-sea. Once, when she was away, sailing the empty dunes with her white rays, I hobbled up to her studio. There I found a dozen of her paintings mounted on trestles in the windows, looking out on the desert below. Sentinels watching for Hope's phantom mariner, they revealed in monotonous detail the contours and texture of the empty landscape.

By comparison, the two portraits developing in the library were far more interesting. As always, they recapitulated in reverse, like some bizarre embryo, a complete phylogeny of modern art, a regression through the principal schools of the twentieth century. After the first liquid ripples

and motion of a kinetic phase, they stabilized into the block colours of the hard-edge school, and from there, as a thousand arteries of colour irrigated the canvas, into a brilliant replica of Jackson Pollock. These coalesced into the crude forms of late Picasso, in which Hope appeared as a Junoesque madonna with massive shoulders and concrete face, and then through surrealist fantasies of anatomy into the multiple outlines of futurism and cubism. Ultimately an impressionist period emerged, lasting a few hours, a roseate sea of powdery light in which we seemed like a placid domestic couple in the suburban bowers of Monet and Renoir.

Watching this reverse evolution, I hoped for something in the style of Gainsborough or Reynolds, a standing portrait of Hope wearing floral scarlet under an azure sky, a pale-skinned English beauty in the grounds of her county house.

Instead, we plunged backwards into the netherworld of Balthus and Gustave Moreau.

As the bizarre outlines of my own figure emerged I was too surprised to notice the equally strange elements in Hope's portrait. At first glance the painting had produced a faithful if stylized likeness of myself seated on the sofa, but by some subtle emphasis of design the scene was totally transformed. The purple curtain draped behind the sofa resembled an immense velvet sail, collapsed against the deck of a becalmed ship, while the spiral bolster emerged as an ornamental prow. Most striking of all, the white lace cushions I lay against appeared as the plumage of an enormous sea-bird, hung around my shoulders like the anchor fallen from the sky. My own expression, of bitter pathos, completed the identification.

'The Ancient Mariner again,' Hope said, weighing my copy of Maldoror in her hand as she sauntered around the canvas. 'Fate seems to have type-cast you, Robert. Still, that's the role I've always seen you in.'

'Better than the Flying Dutchman, Hope?'

She turned sharply, a nervous tic in one corner of her mouth. 'Why did you say that?'

'Hope, who are you looking for? I may have come across him.'

She walked away from me to the window. At the far end of the terrace Foyle was playing some rough game with the sand-rays, knocking them from the air with his heavy hands and then pitching them out over the rock spires. The long stings whipped at his pock-marked face.

'Hope . . .' I went over to her. 'Perhaps it's time I left. There's no point in my staying here. They've repaired the yacht.' I pointed to the sloop moored against the quay, fresh tyres on its wheels. 'Besides . . .'

'No! Robert, you're still reading Maldoror.' Hope gazed at me with her over-large eyes, carrying out this microscopy of my face as if waiting for some absent element in my character to materialize.

For an hour I read to her, more as a gesture to calm her. For some reason she kept searching the painting which bore my veiled likeness as the Mariner, as if this image concealed some other sailor of the sand-sea.

When she had gone, hunting across the dunes in her schooner, I went

over to her own portrait. It was then that I realized that yet another intruder had appeared in this house of illusions.

The portrait showed Hope in a conventional pose, seated like any heiress on a brocaded chair. The eye was drawn to her opal hair lying like a soft harp on her strong shoulders, and to her firm mouth with its slight reflective dip at the corners. What Hope and I had not noticed was the presence of a second figure in the painting. Standing against the skyline on the terrace behind Hope was the image of a man in a white jacket, his head lowered to reveal the bony plates of his forehead. The watery outline of his figure – the hands hanging at his sides were pale smudges – gave him the appearance of a man emerging from a drowned sea, strewn with blanched weeds and algae.

Astonished by this spectre materializing in the background of the painting, I waited until the next morning to see if it was some aberration of light and pigment. But the figure was there even more strongly, the bony features emerging through the impasto. The isolated eyes cast their dark gaze across the room. As I read to Hope after lunch I waited for her to comment on this strange intruder. Someone, plainly not her half-brother, was spending at least an hour each day before the canvas in order to imprint his image on its surface.

As Hope stood up to leave, the man's pensive face with its fixed eyes caught her attention. 'Robert – you have some kind of wild magic! You're there again!'

But I knew the man was not myself. The white jacket, the bony forehead and hard mouth were signatures of a separate subject. After Hope left to walk along the beach I went up to her studio and examined the canvases that kept watch for her on the landscape.

Sure enough, in the two paintings that faced the reefs to the south I found the mast of a waiting ship half-concealed among the sand-bars.

Each morning the figure emerged more clearly, its watching eyes seeming to come nearer, One evening, before going to bed, I locked the windows on to the terrace and draped a curtain over the painting. At midnight I heard something move along the terrace, and found the library windows swinging in the cold air, the curtain drawn back from Hope's portrait. In the painting the man's strong but melancholy face glared down at me with an almost spectral intensity. I ran on to the terrace. Through the powdery light a man's muffled figure moved with firm steps along the beach. The white rays revolved in the dim air over his head.

Five minutes later the white-haired figure of Foyle slouched from the darkness. His thick mouth moved in a grimace of morose humour as he shuffled past. On his black silk slippers there were no traces of sand.

Shortly before dawn I stood in the library, staring back at the watching eyes of this phantom visitor who came each night to keep his vigil by Hope's picture. Taking out my handkerchief, I wiped his face from the

canvas, and for two hours stood with my own face close to the painting. Quickly the blurred paint took on my own features, the pigments moving to their places in a convection of tonalities. A travesty appeared before me, a man in a white yachtsman's jacket with strong shoulders and high forehead, the physique of some intelligent man of action, on which were superimposed my own plump features and brush moustache.

The paint annealed, the first light of the false dawn touching the sand-blown terrace.

'Charles!'

Hope Cunard stepped through the open window, her white gown shivering around her naked body like a tremulous wraith. She stood beside me, staring at my face on the portrait.

'So it *is* you. Robert, Charles Rademaeker came back as you . . . The sand-sea brings us strange dreams.'

Five minutes later, as we moved arm in arm along the corridor to her bedroom, we entered an empty room. From a cabinet Hope took a white yachting-jacket. The linen was worn and sand-stained. Dried blood marked a bullet-hole in its waist.

I wore it like a target.

The image of Charles Rademaeker hovered in Hope's eyes as she sat on her bed like a tired dream-walker and watched me seal the windows of her bedroom.

During the days that followed, as we sailed the sand-sea together, she told me something of her affair with Charles Rademaeker, this Dutchman, recluse and intellectual who wandered across the desert in his yacht cataloguing the rare fauna of the dunes. Drifting out of the dusk air with a broken yard two years earlier, he had dropped anchor at Lizard Key. Coming ashore for cocktails, his stay had lasted for several weeks, a bizarre love-idyll between himself and this shy and beautiful painter that came to a violent end. What happened Hope never made clear. At times, as I wore the blood-stained jacket with its bullet-hole, I guessed that she had shot him, perhaps while she sat for a portrait. Evidently something strange had occurred to a canvas, as if it had revealed to Rademaeker some of the unstated elements he had begun to suspect in Hope's character. After their tragic climax, when Rademaeker had either been killed or escaped, Hope searched the sand-sea for him each summer in her white schooner.

Now Rademaeker had returned – whether from the desert or the dead – cast up from the fractured sand in my own person. Did Hope really believe that I was her reincarnated lover? Sometimes at night, as she lay beside me in the cabin, the reflected light of the quartz veins moving over her breasts like necklaces, she would talk to me as if completely aware of my separate identity. Then, after we had made love, she would deliberately keep me from sleeping, as if disturbed by even this attempt to leave her, and would call me Rademaeker, her clouded face that of a neurotic and disintegrating woman. At these moments I could

understand why Foyle and Barbara Quimby had retreated into their private world.

As I look back now, I think I merely provided Hope with a respite from her obsession with Rademaeker, a chance to live out her illusion in this strange emotional pantomime. Meanwhile Rademaeker himself waited for us nearby in the secret places of the desert.

One evening I took Hope sailing across the dark sand-sea. I told the crew to switch on the rigging lights and the decorated bulbs around the deck awning. Driving this ship of light across the black sand, I stood with Hope by the stern rail, my arm around her waist. Asleep as she stood there, her head lay on my shoulder. Her opal hair lifted in the dark wake like the skeleton of some primeval bird.

An hour later, as we reached Lizard Key, I saw a white schooner slip its anchor somewhere among the sand-reefs and head away into the open sea.

Only Hope's half-brother was now left to remind me of my precarious hold on both Hope and the island. Foyle had kept out of my way, playing his private games among the rock spires below the terrace. Now and then, when he saw us walking arm in arm, he would look up from his beach chair with droll but wary eyes.

One morning, soon after I had suggested to Hope that she send her half-brother and Miss Quimby back to her house in Red Beach, Foyle sauntered into the library. I noticed the marked jauntiness of his manner. One hand pressed to his heavy mouth, he gestured sceptically at the portraits of Hope and myself. 'First the Ancient Mariner, now the Flying Dutchman – for a bad sailor you're playing an awful lot of sea roles, Melville. Thirty days in an open divan, eh? What are you playing next – Captain Ahab, Jonah?'

Barbara Quimby came up behind him, and the two of them smirked down at me, Foyle with his ugly faun's head.

'What about Prospero?' I rejoined evenly. 'This island is full of visions. With you as Caliban, Foyle.'

Nodding to himself at this, Foyle strolled up to the paintings. A large hand sketched in obscene outlines. Barbara Quimby began to laugh. Arms around each other's waists, they left together. Their tittering voices merged with the cries of the sand-rays wheeling above the rock spires in the blood-red air.

Shortly afterwards, the first curious changes began to occur to our portraits. That evening, as we sat together in the library, I noticed a slight but distinct alteration in the planes of Hope's face on the canvas, a pock-like disfigurement of the skin. The texture of her hair had altered, taking on a yellowish sheen.

This transformation was even more pronounced the following day. The eyes in the painting had developed a squint, as if the canvas had begun to

recognize some imbalance within Hope's own gaze. I turned to the portrait of myself. Here, too, a remarkable change was taking place. My face had begun to develop a snout-like nose. The heavy flesh massed around the lips and nostrils, and the eyes were becoming smaller, submerged in the rolls of fat. Even my clothes had changed their texture, the black and white checks of my silk shirt resembling the suit of some bizarre harlequin.

By the next morning this ugly metamorphosis was so startling that even Hope would have noticed it. As I stood in the dawn light, the figures that looked down at me were those of some monstrous saturnalia. Hope's hair was now a bright yellow. The curled locks framed a face like a powdered skull. As for myself, my pig-snouted face resembled a nightmare visage from the black landscapes of Hieronymus Bosch.

I drew the curtain across the paintings, and then examined my mouth and eyes in the mirror. Was this mocking travesty how Hope and I really appeared? I decided that the pigments were faulty – Hope rarely renewed her stock – and were producing these diseased images of ourselves. After breakfast we dressed in our yachting clothes and went down to the quay. I said nothing to Hope. All day we sailed within sight of the island, not returning until the evening.

Shortly after midnight, as I lay beside Hope in her bedroom below the studio, I was woken by the white rays whooping through the darkness across the windows. They circled like agitated beacons. In the studio, careful not to wake Hope, I searched the canvases by the windows. In one I found the fresh image of a white ship, its sails concealed in a cove half a mile from the island.

So Rademaeker had returned, his presence in some way warping the pigments in our portraits. Convinced at the time by this insane logic, I drove my fists through the canvas, oblitering the image of the ship. My hands and arms smeared with wet paint, I went down to the bedroom. Hope slept on the crossed pillows, hands clasped over her breasts.

I took the automatic pistol which she kept in her bedside table. Through the window the white triangle of Rademaeker's sail rose into the night air as he raised his anchor.

Halfway down the staircase I could see into the library. Arc lights had been set up on the floor. They bathed the canvases in their powerful light, accelerating the motion of the pigments. In front of the paintings, grimacing in obscene poses, were two creatures from a nightmare. The taller wore a black robe like a priest's cassock, a pig's papier-mâché mask on his head. Beside him was a woman in a yellow wig with a powdered face, bright lips and eyes. Together they primped and preened in front of the paintings.

Kicking back the door, I had a full glimpse of these nightmare figures. On the paintings the flesh ran like overheated wax, the images of Hope and myself taking up their own obscene pose. Beyond the blaze of arc lights the woman in the yellow wig slipped from the curtains on to the terrace. As I

stepped over the cables I was aware briefly of a man's cloaked shoulders behind me. Something struck me below the ear. I fell to my knees, and the black robes swept over me to the window.

'Rademaeker!' Holding a paint-smeared hand to my neck, I stumbled over the pewter statuette that had struck me and ran out on to the terrace. The frantic rays whipped through the darkness like shreds of luminous spit. Below me, two figures ran down among the rock spires towards the beach.

Almost exhausted by the time I reached the beach, I walked clumsily across the dark sand, eyes stinging from the paint on my hands. Fifty yards from the beach the white sails of an immense sand-schooner rose into the night air, its bowsprit pointing towards me.

Lying on the sand at my feet were the remains of a yellow wig, a pig's plaster snout and the tattered cassock. Trying to pick them up, I fell to my knees. 'Rademaeker . . . !'

A foot struck my shoulder. A slim, straight-backed man wearing a yachtsman's cap stared down at me with irritated eyes. Although he was smaller than I had imagined, I immediately recognized his sparse, melancholy face.

He pulled me to my feet with a strong hand. He gestured at the mask and costume, and at my paint-smeared arms.

'Now, what's this nonsense? What games are you people playing?'

'Rademaeker . . .' I dropped the yellow-locked wig on to the sand. 'I thought it was –'

'Where's Hope?' His trim jaw lifted as he scanned the villa. 'Those rays . . . Is she here? What is this – a black mass?'

'Damn nearly.' I glanced along the deserted beach, illuminated by the light reflected off the great sails of the schooner. I realized whom I had seen posturing in front of the canvas. 'Foyle and the girl! Rademaeker, they were there –'

Already he was ahead of me up the path, only pausing to shout to his two crewmen watching from the bows of the yacht. I ran after him, wiping the paint off my face with the wig. Rademaeker darted away from the path to take a short cut to the terrace. His compact figure moved swiftly among the rock spires, slipping between the sonic statues growing from the fused sand.

When I reached the terrace he was already standing in the darkness by the library windows, gazing in at the brilliant light. He removed his cap with a careful gesture, like a swain paying court to his sweetheart. His smooth hair, dented by the cap brim, gave him a surprisingly youthful appearance, unlike the hard-faced desert rover I had visualized. As he stood there watching Hope, whose white-robed figure was reflected in the open windows, I could see him in the same stance on his secret visits to the island, gazing for hours at her portrait.

'Hope . . . let me –'

Rademaeker threw down his cap and ran forward. A gunshot roared

out, its impact breaking a pane in the french windows. The sound boomed among the rock spires, startling the rays into the air. Pushing back the velvet curtains, I stepped into the room.

Rademaeker's hands were on the brocaded sofa. He moved quietly, trying to reach Hope before she noticed him. Her back to us, she stood by the painting with the pistol in her hand.

Over-excited by the intense light from the arc lamps, the pigments had almost boiled off the surface of the canvas. The livid colours of Hope's pus-filled face ran like putrefying flesh. Beside her the pig-faced priest in my own image presided over her body like the procurator of hell.

Her eyes like ice, Hope turned to face Rademaeker and myself. She stared at the yellow wig in my hands, and at the paint smeared over my arms. Her face was empty. All expression had slipped from it as if in an avalanche.

The first shot had punctured the portrait of herself. Already the paint was beginning to run through the bullet-hole. Like a dissolving vampire, the yellow-haired lamia with Hope's features began to sway and spiral downwards.

'Hope . . .' Rademaeker moved forward. Before he could take her wrist she turned and fired at him. The shot tore the glass from the window beside me. The fragments lay in the darkness like pieces of a broken moon.

The next shot struck Rademaeker in the left wrist. He dropped to one knee, gripping the bloodied wound. Confused by the explosions, which had almost jarred the pistol from her grip, Hope held the weapon in both hands, pointing it at the old bloodstain on my jacket. Before she could fire I kicked one of the arc lights across her feet. The room spun like a collapsing stage. I pulled Rademaeker by the shoulder on to the terrace.

We ran down to the beach. Halfway along the path Rademaeker stopped, as if undecided whether to go back. Hope stood on the terrace, firing down at the rays that screamed through the darkness over our heads. The white schooner was already casting off, its sails lifting in the night air.

Rademaeker beckoned to me with his bloodied wrist. 'Get to the ship. She's alone now . . . for ever.'

We crouched in the steering well of the schooner, listening to the sonic sculptures wail in the disturbed air as the last shots echoed across the empty desert.

At dawn Rademaeker dropped me half a mile from the beach at Ciraquito. He had spent the night at the helm, his bandaged wrist held like a badge to his chest, steering with his one strong hand. In the cold night air I tried to explain why Hope had shot at him, this last attempt to break through the illusions multiplying around her and reach some kind of reality.

'Rademaeker – I knew her. She wasn't shooting at you, but at a . . .

fiction of yourself, that image in the portrait. Damn it, she was obsessed with you.'

But he seemed no longer interested, his thin mouth with its uneasy lips making no reply. In some way he had disappointed me. Whoever finally took Hope away from Lizard Key would first have to accept the overlapping illusions that were the fabric of that strange island. By refusing to admit the reality of her fantasies Rademaeker had destroyed her.

When he left me among the dunes within sight of the beach-houses he gave a brusque salute and spun the helm, his erect figure soon lost among the rolling crests.

Three weeks later I chartered a yacht from one of the local ray-fishermen and went back to the island to collect my sloop. Hope's schooner was at its mooring. She herself, calm in her pale and angular beauty, came on to the terrace to greet me.

The paintings had gone, and with them any memory of that violent night. Hope's eyes looked at me with an untroubled gaze. Only her hands with their slim fingers moved with a restless life of their own.

At the end of the terrace her half-brother lounged among the beach chairs, Rademaeker's yachting cap propped over his eyes. Barbara Quimby sat beside him. I wondered whether to explain to Hope the callous and macabre game they had played with her, but after a few minutes she wandered away. Foyle's simpering mouth was the last residue of this world. Devoid of malice, he accepted his half-sister's reality as his own.

However, Hope Cunard has not entirely forgotten Charles Rademaeker. At midnight I sometimes see her sailing the sand-sea, in pursuit of a white ship with white sails. Last night, acting on some bizarre impulse, I dressed myself in the bloodstained jacket once worn by Rademaeker and sailed out to the edge of the sand-sea. I waited by a reef I knew she would pass. As she swept by soundlessly, her tall figure against the last light of the sun, I stood in the bows, letting her see the jacket. Again I wore it like a target.

Yet others sail this strange sea. Hope passed within fifty yards and never noticed me, but half an hour later a second yacht moved past, a rakish ketch with dragon's eyes on its bows and a tall, heavy-mouthed man wearing a yellow wig at its helm. Beside him a dark-eyed young woman smiled to the wind. As he passed, Foyle waved to me, and an ironic cheer carried itself across the dead sand to where I stood in my target-coat. Masquerading as mad priest or harpy, siren or dune-witch, they cross the sand-sea on their own terms. In the evenings, as they sail past, I can hear them laughing.

1967

THE RECOGNITION

On Midsummer's Eve a small circus visited the town in the West Country where I was spending my holiday. Three days earlier the large travelling fair which always came to the town in the summer, equipped with a ferris wheel, merry-go-rounds and dozens of booths and shooting galleries, had taken up its usual site on the open common in the centre of the town, and this second arrival was forced to pitch its camp on the waste ground beyond the warehouses along the river.

At dusk, when I strolled through the town, the ferris wheel was revolving above the coloured lights, and people were riding the carousels and walking arm in arm along the cobbled roads that surrounded the common. Away from this hubbub of noise the streets down to the river were almost deserted, and I was glad to walk alone through the shadows past the boarded shopfronts. Midsummer's Eve seemed to me a time for reflection as much as for celebration, for a careful watch on the shifting movements of nature. When I crossed the river, whose dark water flowed through the town like a gilded snake, and entered the woods that stretched to one side of the road, I had the unmistakable sensation that the forest was preparing itself, and that within its covens even the roots of the trees were sliding through the soil and testing their sinews.

It was on the way back from this walk, as I crossed the bridge, that I saw the small itinerant circus arrive at the town. The procession, which approached the bridge by a side road, consisted of no more than half a dozen wagons, each carrying a high barred cage and drawn by a pair of careworn horses. At its head a young woman with a pallid face and bare arms rode on a grey stallion. I leaned on the balustrade in the centre of the bridge and watched the procession reach the embankment. The young woman hesitated, pulling on the heavy leather bridle, and looked over her shoulder as the wagons closed together. They began to ascend the bridge. Although the gradient was slight, the horses seemed barely able to reach the crest, tottering on their weak legs, and I had ample time to make a first scrutiny of this strange caravan that was later to preoccupy me.

Urging on her tired stallion, the young woman passed me – at least, it seemed to me then that she was young, but her age was so much a matter of her own moods and mine. I was to see her on several occasions – sometimes she would seem little more than a child of twelve, with an

unformed chin and staring eyes above the bony cheeks. Later she would appear to be almost middle-aged, the grey hair and skin revealing the angular skull beneath them.

At first, as I watched from the bridge, I guessed her to be about twenty years old, presumably the daughter of the proprietor of this threadbare circus. As she jogged along with one hand on the reins the lights from the distant fairground shone intermittently in her face, disclosing a high-bridged nose and firm mouth. Although by no means beautiful, she had that curious quality of attractiveness that I had often noticed in the women who worked at fairgrounds, an elusive sexuality despite their shabby clothes and surroundings. As she passed she looked down at me, her quiet eyes on some unfelt point within my face.

The six wagons followed her, the horses heaving the heavy cages across the camber. Behind the bars I caught a glimpse of worn straw and a small hutch in the corner, but there was no sign of the animals. I assumed them to be too undernourished to do more than sleep. As the last wagon passed I saw the only other member of the troupe, a dwarf in a leather jacket driving the wooden caravan at the rear.

I walked after them across the bridge, wondering if they were late arrivals at the fair already in progress. But from the way they hesitated at the foot of the bridge, the young woman looking to left and right while the dwarf sat hunched in the shadow of the cage in front of him, it was plain they had no connection whatever with the brilliant ferris wheel and the amusements taking place on the common. Even the horses, standing uncertainly with their heads lowered to avoid the coloured lights, seemed aware of this exclusion.

After a pause they moved off along the narrow road that followed the bank, the wagons rolling from side to side as the wooden wheels slipped on the grass-covered verge. A short distance away was a patch of waste ground that separated the warehouses near the wharves from the terraced cottages below the bridge. A single street lamp on the north side cast a dim light over the cinder surface. By now dusk had settled over the town and seemed to isolate this dingy patch of ground, no longer enlivened in any way by the movement of the river.

The procession headed towards this dark enclosure. The young woman turned her horse off the road and led the wagons across the cinders to the high wall of the first warehouse. Here they stopped, the wagons still in line ahead, the horses obviously glad to be concealed by the darkness. The dwarf jumped down from his perch and trotted round to where the woman was dismounting from the stallion.

At this time I was strolling along the bank a short distance behind them. Something about this odd little troupe intrigued me, though in retrospect it may be that the calm eyes of the young woman as she looked down at me had acted as more of a spur than seemed at the time. Nonetheless, I was puzzled by what seemed the very pointlessness of their existence. Few things are as drab as a down-at-heel circus, but

this one was so travel-worn and dejected as to deny them the chance of making any profit whatever. Who were this strange pale-haired woman and her dwarf? Did they imagine that anyone would actually come to this dismal patch of ground by the warehouses to look at their secretive animals? Perhaps they were simply delivering a group of aged creatures to an abattoir specialising in circus animals, and pausing here for the night before moving on.

Yet, as I suspected, the young woman and the dwarf were already moving the wagons into the unmistakable pattern of a circus. The woman dragged at the bridles while the dwarf darted between her feet, switching at the horses' ankles with his leather hat. The docile brutes heaved at their wagons, and within five minutes the cages were arranged in a rough circle. The horses were unshackled from their shafts, and the dwarf, helped by the young woman, led them towards the river where they began cropping quietly at the dark grass.

Within the cages there was a stir of movement, and one or two pale forms shuffled about in the straw. The dwarf scurried up the steps of the caravan and lit a lamp over a stove which I could see in the doorway. He came down with a metal bucket and moved along the cages. He poured a little water into each of the pails and pushed them towards the hutches with a broom.

The woman followed him, but seemed as uninterested as the dwarf in the animals inside the cages. When he put away the bucket she held a ladder for him and he climbed onto the roof of the caravan. He lowered down a bundle of clapboard signs fastened together by a strip of canvas. After untying them the dwarf carried the signs over to the cages. He climbed up the ladder again and began to secure the signs over the bars.

In the dim light from the street lamp I could make out only the faded designs painted years earlier in the traditional style of fairground marquees, the floral patterns and cartouches overlaid with lettering of some kind. Moving nearer the cages, I reached the edge of the clearing. The young woman turned and saw me. The dwarf was fixing the last of the signs, and she stood by the ladder, one hand on the shaft, regarding me with an unmoving gaze. Perhaps it was her protective stance as the diminutive figure moved about above her, but she seemed far older than when she had first appeared with her menagerie at the outskirts of the town. In the faint light her hair had become almost grey, and her bare arms seemed lined and work-worn. As I drew closer, passing the first of the cages, she turned to follow me with her eyes, as if trying to take some interest in my arrival on the scene.

At the top of the ladder there was a flurry of movement. Slipping through the dwarf's fingers, the sign toppled from the roof and fell to the ground at the woman's feet. Whirling his short arms and legs, the dwarf leapt down from the ladder. He picked himself off the ground, wobbling about like a top as he regained his balance. He dusted his

hat against his boots and put it back on his head, then started up the ladder again.

The woman held his arm. She moved the ladder further along the cage, trying to balance the shafts against the bars.

On an impulse, more or less out of sympathy, I stepped forward.

'Can I help you?' I said. 'Perhaps I can reach the roof. If you hand me the sign . . .'

The dwarf hesitated, looking at me with his doleful eyes. He seemed prepared to let me help, but stood there with his hat in one hand as if prevented from saying anything to me by an unstated set of circumstances, some division of life as formal and impassable as those of the most rigid castes.

The woman, however, gestured me to the ladder, turning her face away as I settled the shafts against the bars. Through the dim light she watched the horses cropping the grass along the bank.

I climbed the ladder, and then took the sign lifted up to me by the dwarf. I settled it on the roof, weighing it down with two half bricks left there for the purpose, and read the legends painted across the warped panel. As I deciphered the words 'marvels' and 'spectacular' (obviously the signs bore no relation to the animals within the cages, and had been stolen from another fair or found on some refuse heap) I noticed a sudden movement from the cage below me. There was a burrowing through the straw, and a low, pale-skinned creature retreated into its burrow.

This disturbance of the straw – whether the animal had darted out from fear or in an attempt to warn me off I had no means of telling – had released a strong and obscurely familiar smell. It hung around me as I came down the ladder, muffled but vaguely offensive. I searched the hutch for a glimpse of the animal, but it had scuffled the straw into the door.

The dwarf and the woman nodded to me as I turned from the ladder. There was no hostility in their attitude – the dwarf, if anything, was on the point of thanking me, his mouth moving in a wordless rictus – but for some reason they seemed to feel unable to make any contact with me. The woman was standing with her back to the street lamp, and her face, softened by the darkness, now appeared small and barely formed, like that of an unkempt child.

'You're all ready,' I said half jocularly. With something of an effort, I added: 'It looks very nice.'

I glanced at the cages when they made no comment. One or two of the animals sat at the backs of their hutches, their pale forms indistinct in the faint light. 'When do you open?' I asked. 'Tomorrow?'

'We're open now,' the dwarf said.

'Now?' Not sure whether this was a joke, I started to point at the cages, but the statement had obviously been meant at its face value.

'I see . . . you're open this evening.' Searching for something to say – they seemed prepared to stand there indefinitely with me – I went on: 'When do you leave?'

'Tomorrow,' the woman told me in a low voice. 'We have to go in the morning.'

As if taking their cue from this, the two of them moved across the small arena, clearing to one side the pieces of newspaper and other refuse. By the time I walked away, baffled by the entire purpose of this pitiful menagerie, they had already finished, and stood waiting between the cages for their first customers. I paused on the bank beside the cropping horses, whose quiet figures seemed as insubstantial as those of the dwarf and their mistress, and wondered what bizarre logic had brought them to the town, when a second fair, almost infinitely larger and gayer, was already in full swing.

At the thought of the animals I recalled the peculiar smell that hung about the cages, vaguely unpleasant but reminiscent of an odour I was certain I knew well. For some reason I was also convinced that this familiar smell was a clue to the strange nature of the circus. Beside me the horses gave off a pleasant scent of bran and sweat. Their downcast heads, lowered to the grass by the water's edge, seemed to hide from me some secret concealed within their luminous eyes.

I walked back towards the centre of the town, relieved to see the illuminated superstructure of the ferris wheel rotating above the rooftops. The roundabouts and amusement arcades, the shooting galleries and the tunnel of love were part of a familiar world. Even the witches and vampires painted over the house of horrors were nightmares from a predictable quarter of the evening sky. By contrast the young woman – or was she young? – and her dwarf were travellers from an unknown country, a vacant realm where nothing had any meaning. It was this absence of intelligible motive that I found so disturbing about them.

I wandered through the crowds below the marquees, and on an impulse decided to ride on the ferris wheel. As I waited my turn with the group of young men and women, the electrified gondolas of the wheel rose high into the evening air, so that all the music and light of the fair seemed to have been scooped from the star-filled sky.

I climbed into my gondola, sharing it with a young woman and her daughter, and a few moments later we were revolving through the brilliant air, the fairground spread below us. During the two or three minutes of the ride I was busy shouting to the young woman and her child as we pointed out to each other familiar landmarks in the town. However, when we stopped and sat at the top of the wheel as the passengers below disembarked, I noticed for the first time the bridge I had crossed earlier that evening. Following the course of the river, I saw the single street lamp that shone over the waste ground near the warehouses where the white-faced woman and the dwarf had set up their rival circus. As our gondola moved forward and began its descent the dim forms of two of the wagons were visible in an interval between the rooftops.

Half an hour later, when the fair began to close, I walked back to the river. Small groups of people were moving arm in arm through the streets,

but by the time the warehouses came into sight I was almost alone on the cobbled pavements that wound between the terraced cottages. Then the street lamp appeared, and the circle of wagons beyond it.

To my surprise, a few people were actually visiting the menagerie. I stood in the road below the street lamp and watched the two couples and a third man who were wandering around the cages and trying to identify the animals. Now and then they would go up to the bars and peer through them, and there was a shout of laughter as one of the women pretended to flinch away in alarm. The man with her held a few shreds of straw in his hand and threw them at the door of the hutch, but the animal refused to appear. The group resumed their circuit of the cages, squinting in the dim light.

Meanwhile the dwarf and the woman remained silent to one side. The woman stood by the steps of the caravan, looking out at her patrons as if unconcerned whether they came or not. The dwarf, his bulky hat hiding his face, stood patiently on the other side of the arena, moving his ground as the party of visitors continued their tour. He was not carrying a collection bag or roll of tickets, and it seemed likely, even if only reasonable, that there was no charge for admission.

Something of the peculiar atmosphere, or perhaps their failure to bring the animals from their hutches, seemed to transmit itself to the party of visitors. After trying to read the signs, one of the men began to rattle a stick between the bars of the cages. Then, losing interest abruptly, they made off together without a backward glance at either the woman or the dwarf. As he passed me the man with the stick pulled a face and waved his hand in front of his nose.

I waited until they had gone and then approached the cages. The dwarf appeared to remember me – at least, he made no effort to scuttle away but watched me with his drifting eyes. The woman sat on the steps of the caravan, gazing across the cinders with the expression of a tired and unthinking child.

I glanced into one or two of the cages. There was no sign of the animals, but the smell that had driven off the previous party was certainly pronounced. The familiar pungent odour quickened my nostrils. I walked over to the young woman.

'You've had some visitors,' I commented.

'Not many,' she replied. 'A few have come.'

I was about to point out that she could hardly expect a huge attendance if none of the animals in the cages was prepared to make an appearance, but the girl's hangdog look restrained me. The top of her robe revealed a small childlike breast, and it seemed impossible that this pale young woman should have been put in sole charge of such a doomed enterprise. Searching for an excuse that might console her, I said: 'It's rather late, there's the other fair . . .' I pointed to the cages. 'That smell, too. Perhaps you're used to it, it might put people off.' I forced a smile. 'I'm sorry, I don't mean to –'

'I understand,' she said matter-of-factly. 'It's why we have to leave so soon.' She nodded at the dwarf. 'We clean them every day.'

I was about to ask what animals the cages held – the smell reminded me of the chimpanzee house at the zoo – when there was a commotion from the direction of the bank. A group of sailors, two or three girls among them, came swaying along the towpath. They greeted the sight of the menagerie with boisterous shouts. Linked arm in arm, they made a drunken swerve up the bank, then stamped across the cinders to the cages. The dwarf moved out of their way, and watched from the shadows between two of the wagons, hat in hand.

The sailors pushed over to one of the cages and pressed their faces to the bars, nudging each other in the ribs and whistling in an effort to bring the creature out of its hutch. They moved over to the next cage, pulling at each other in a struggling mêlée.

One of them shouted at the woman, who sat on the steps of the caravan. 'Are you closed, or what? The perisher won't come out of his hole!'

There was a roar of laughter at this. Another of the sailors rattled one of the girls' handbags, and then dug into his pockets.

'Pennies out, lads. Who's got the tickets?'

He spotted the dwarf and tossed the penny towards him. A moment later a dozen coins showered through the air around the dwarf's head. He scuttled about, warding them off with his hat, but made no effort to pick up the coins.

The sailors moved on to the third cage. After a fruitless effort to draw the animal towards them they began to rock the wagon from side to side. Their good humour was beginning to fade. As I left the young woman and strolled past the cages several of the sailors had started to climb up onto the bars.

At this point one of the doors sprang open. As it clanged against the bars the noise fell away. Everyone stepped back, as if expecting some huge striped tiger to spring out at them from its hutch. Two of the sailors moved forward and gingerly reached for the door. As they closed it one of them peered into the cage. Suddenly he leapt up into the doorway. The others shouted at him, but the sailor kicked aside the straw and and stepped across to the hutch.

'It's bloody empty!'

As he shouted this out there was a delighted roar. Slamming the door – curiously enough, the bolt was on the inside – the sailor began to prance around the cage, gibbering like a baboon through the bars. At first I thought he must be mistaken, and looked round at the young woman and the dwarf. Both were watching the sailors but gave no inkling that there was any danger from the animal within. Sure enough, as a second sailor was let into the cage and dragged the hutch over to the bars, I saw that it was unoccupied.

Involuntarily I found myself staring at the young woman. Was this, then, the point of this strange and pathetic menagerie – that there were

no animals at all, at least in most of the cages, and that what was being exhibited was simply nothing, merely the cages themselves, the essence of imprisonment with all its ambiguities? Was this a zoo in the abstract, some kind of bizarre comment on the meaning of life? Yet neither the young woman nor the dwarf seemed subtle enough for this, and possibly there was a less farfetched explanation. Perhaps once there had been animals, but these had died out, and the girl and her companion had found that people would still come and gaze at the empty cages, with much the same fascination of visitors to disused cemeteries. After a while they no longer charged any admission, but drifted aimlessly from town to town . . .

Before I could pursue this train of thought there was a shout behind me. A sailor ran past, brushing my shoulder. The discovery of the empty cage had removed any feelings of restraint, and the sailors were chasing the dwarf among the wagons. At this first hint of violence the woman stood up and disappeared into the caravan, and the poor dwarf was left to fend for himself. One of the sailors tripped him up and snatched the hat off his head as the little figure lay in the dust with his legs in the air.

The sailor in front of me caught the hat and was about to toss it up onto one of the wagon roofs. Stepping forward, I held his arm, but he wrenched himself away. The dwarf had vanished from sight, and another group of the sailors were trying to turn one of the wagons and push it towards the river. Two of them had got among the horses and were lifting the women onto their backs. The grey stallion which had led the procession across the bridge suddenly bolted along the bank. Running after it through the confusion, I heard a warning shout behind me. There was the thud of hooves on the wet turf, and a woman's cry as a horse swerved above me. I was struck on the head and shoulder and knocked heavily to the ground.

It must have been some two hours later that I awoke, lying on a bench beside the bank. Under the night sky the town was silent, and I could hear the faint sounds of a water vole moving along the river and the distant splash of water around the bridge. I sat up and brushed away the dew that had formed on my clothes. Further along the bank the circus wagons stood in the clearing darkness, the dim forms of the horses motionless by the water.

Collecting myself, I decided that after being knocked down by the horse I had been carried to the bench by the sailors and left there to recover when and as soon as I could. Nursing my head and shoulders, I looked around for any sign of the party, but the bank was deserted. Standing up, I slowly walked back towards the circus, in the vague hope that the dwarf might help me home.

Twenty yards away, I saw something move in one of the cages, its white form passing in front of the bars. There was no sign of the dwarf or the young woman, but the wagons had been pushed back into place.

Standing in the centre of the cages, I peered about uncertainly, aware

that their occupants had at last emerged from the hutches. The angular grey bodies were indistinct in the darkness, but as familiar as the pungent smell that came from the cages.

A voice shouted behind me, a single obscene word. I turned to find its source, and saw one of the occupants watching me with cold eyes. As I stared he raised his hand and moved the fingers in a perverted gesture.

A second voice called out, followed by a chorus of abusive catcalls. With an effort, I managed to clear my head, then began a careful walk around the cages, satisfying myself for the last time as to the identity of their tenants. Except for the one at the end, which was empty, the others were occupied. The thin figures stood openly in front of the bars that protected them from me, their pallid faces shining in the dim light. At last I recognised the smell that came from the cages.

As I walked away their derisive voices called after me, and the young woman roused from her bed in the caravan watched quietly from the steps.

1967

THE CLOUD-SCULPTORS OF CORAL D

All summer the cloud-sculptors would come from Vermilion Sands and sail their painted gliders above the coral towers that rose like white pagodas beside the highway to Lagoon West. The tallest of the towers was Coral D, and here the rising air above the sand-reefs was topped by swan-like clumps of fair-weather cumulus. Lifted on the shoulders of the air above the crown of Coral D, we would carve seahorses and unicorns, the portraits of presidents and film stars, lizards and exotic birds. As the crowd watched from their cars, a cool rain would fall on to the dusty roofs, weeping from the sculptured clouds as they sailed across the desert floor towards the sun.

Of all the cloud-sculptures we were to carve, the strangest were the portraits of Leonora Chanel. As I look back to that afternoon last summer when she first came in her white limousine to watch the cloud-sculptors of Coral D, I know we barely realized how seriously this beautiful but insane woman regarded the sculptures floating above her in that calm sky. Later her portraits, carved in the whirlwind, were to weep their storm-rain upon the corpses of their sculptors.

I had arrived in Vermilion Sands three months earlier. A retired pilot, I was painfully coming to terms with a broken leg and the prospect of never flying again. Driving into the desert one day, I stopped near the coral towers on the highway to Lagoon West. As I gazed at these immense pagodas stranded on the floor of this fossil sea, I heard music coming from a sand-reef two hundred yards away. Swinging on my crutches across the sliding sand, I found a shallow basin among the dunes where sonic statues had run to seed beside a ruined studio. The owner had gone, abandoning the hangar-like building to the sand-rays and the desert, and on some half-formed impulse I began to drive out each afternoon. From the lathes and joists left behind I built my first giant kites and, later, gliders with cockpits. Tethered by their cables, they would hang above me in the afternoon air like amiable ciphers.

One evening, as I wound the gliders down on to the winch, a sudden gale rose over the crest of Coral D. While I grappled with the whirling handle, trying to anchor my crutches in the sand, two figures approached across the desert floor. One was a small hunchback with a child's over-lit eyes and a deformed jaw twisted like an anchor barb to one side. He scuttled over to the winch and wound the tattered gliders towards the

ground, his powerful shoulders pushing me aside. He helped me on to my crutch and peered into the hangar. Here my most ambitious glider to date, no longer a kite but a sail-plane with elevators and control lines, was taking shape on the bench.

He spread a large hand over his chest. 'Petit Manuel – acrobat and weight-lifter. Nolan!' he bellowed. 'Look at this!' His companion was squatting by the sonic statues, twisting their helixes so that their voices became more resonant. 'Nolan's an artist,' the hunchback confided to me. 'He'll build you gliders like condors.'

The tall man was wandering among the gliders, touching their wings with a sculptor's hand. His morose eyes were set in a face like a bored boxer's. He glanced at the plaster on my leg and my faded flying-jacket, and gestured at the gliders. 'You've given cockpits to them, major.' The remark contained a complete understanding of my motives. He pointed to the coral towers rising above us into the evening sky. 'With silver iodide we could carve the clouds.'

The hunchback nodded encouragingly to me, his eyes lit by an astronomy of dreams.

So were formed the cloud-sculptors of Coral D. Although I considered myself one of them, I never flew the gliders, but taught Nolan and little Manuel to fly, and later, when he joined us, Charles Van Eyck. Nolan had found this blond-haired pirate of the café terraces in Vermilion Sands, a laconic Teuton with hard eyes and a weak mouth, and brought him out to Coral D when the season ended and the well-to-do tourists and their nubile daughters returned to Red Beach. 'Major Parker – Charles Van Eyck. He's a headhunter,' Nolan commented with cold humour, '– maidenheads.' Despite their uneasy rivalry I realized that Van Eyck would give our group a useful dimension of glamour.

From the first I suspected that the studio in the desert was Nolan's, and that we were all serving some private whim of this dark-haired solitary. At the time, however, I was more concerned with teaching them to fly – first on cable, mastering the updraughts that swept the stunted turret of Coral A, smallest of the towers, then the steeper slopes of B and C, and finally the powerful currents of Coral D. Late one afternoon, when I began to wind them in, Nolan cut away his line. The glider plummeted on to its back, diving down to impale itself on the rock spires. I flung myself to the ground as the cable whipped across my car, shattering the windshield. When I looked up, Nolan was soaring high in the tinted air above Coral D. The wind, guardian of the coral towers, carried him through the islands of cumulus that veiled the evening light.

As I ran to the winch the second cable went, and little Manuel swerved away to join Nolan. Ugly crab on the ground, in the air the hunchback became a bird with immense wings, outflying both Nolan and Van Eyck. I watched them as they circled the coral towers, and then swept down

together over the desert floor, stirring the sand-rays into soot-like clouds. Petit Manuel was jubilant. He strutted around me like a pocket Napoleon, contemptuous of my broken leg, scooping up handfuls of broken glass and tossing them over his head like bouquets to the air.

Two months later, as we drove out to Coral D on the day we were to meet Leonora Chanel, something of this first feeling of exhilaration had faded. Now that the season had ended few tourists travelled to Lagoon West, and often we would perform our cloud-sculpture to the empty highway. Sometimes Nolan would remain behind in his hotel, drinking by himself on the bed, or Van Eyck would disappear for several days with some widow or divorcée, and Petit Manuel and I would go out alone.

None the less, as the four of us drove out in my car that afternoon and I saw the clouds waiting for us above the spire of Coral D, all my depression and fatigue vanished. Ten minutes later, the three cloud gliders rose into the air and the first cars began to stop on the highway. Nolan was in the lead in his black-winged glider, climbing straight to the crown of Coral D two hundred feet above, while Van Eyck soared to and fro below, showing his blond mane to a middle-aged woman in a topaz convertible. Behind them came little Manuel, his candy-striped wings slipping and churning in the disturbed air. Shouting happy obscenities, he flew with his twisted knees, huge arms gesticulating out of the cockpit.

The three gliders, brilliant painted toys, revolved like lazing birds above Coral D, waiting for the first clouds to pass overhead. Van Eyck moved away to take a cloud. He sailed around its white pillow, spraying the sides with iodide crystals and cutting away the flock-like tissue. The steaming shards fell towards us like crumbling ice-drifts. As the drops of condensing spray fell on my face I could see Van Eyck shaping an immense horse's head. He sailed up and down the long forehead and chiselled out the eyes and ears.

As always, the people watching from their cars seemed to enjoy this piece of aerial marzipan. It sailed overhead, carried away on the wind from Coral D. Van Eyck followed it down, wings lazing around the equine head. Meanwhile Petit Manuel worked away at the next cloud. As he sprayed its sides a familiar human head appeared through the tumbling mist. The high wavy mane, strong jaw but slipped mouth Manuel caricatured from the cloud with a series of deft passes, wingtips almost touching each other as he dived in and out of the portrait.

The glossy white head, an unmistakable parody of Van Eyck in his own worst style, crossed the highway towards Vermilion Sands. Manuel slid out of the air, stalling his glider to a landing beside my car as Van Eyck stepped from his cockpit with a forced smile.

We waited for the third display. A cloud formed over Coral D and within a few minutes had blossomed into a pristine fair-weather cumulus. As it hung there Nolan's black-winged glider plunged out of the sun. He

soared around the cloud, cutting away its tissues. The soft fleece fell towards us in a cool rain.

There was a shout from one of the cars. Nolan turned from the cloud, his wings slipping as if unveiling his handiwork. Illuminated by the afternoon sun was the serene face of a three-year-old child. Its wide cheeks framed a placid mouth and plump chin. As one or two people clapped, Nolan sailed over the cloud and rippled the roof into ribbons and curls.

However, I knew that the real climax was yet to come. Cursed by some malignant virus, Nolan seemed unable to accept his own handiwork, always destroying it with the same cold humour. Petit Manuel had thrown away his cigarette, and even Van Eyck had turned his attention from the women in the cars.

Nolan soared above the child's face, following like a matador waiting for the moment of the kill. There was silence for a minute as he worked away at the cloud, and then someone slammed a car door in disgust.

Hanging above us was the white image of a skull.

The child's face, converted by a few strokes, had vanished, but in the notched teeth and gaping orbits, large enough to hold a car, we could still see an echo of its infant features. The spectre moved past us, the spectators frowning at this weeping skull whose rain fell upon their faces.

Half-heartedly I picked my old flying helmet off the back seat and began to carry it around the cars. Two of the spectators drove off before I could reach them. As I hovered about uncertainly, wondering why on earth a retired and well-to-do air-force officer should be trying to collect these few dollar bills, Van Eyck stepped behind me and took the helmet from my hand.

'Not now, major. Look at what arrives – my apocalypse . . .'

A white Rolls-Royce, driven by a chauffeur in braided cream livery, had turned off the highway. Through the tinted communication window a young woman in a secretary's day suit spoke to the chauffeur. Beside her, a gloved hand still holding the window strap, a white-haired woman with jewelled eyes gazed up at the circling wings of the cloud-glider. Her strong and elegant face seemed sealed within the dark glass of the limousine like the enigmatic madonna of some marine grotto.

Van Eyck's glider rose into the air, soaring upwards to the cloud that hung above Coral D. I walked back to my car, searching the sky for Nolan. Above, Van Eyck was producing a pastiche Mona Lisa, a picture-postcard Gioconda as authentic as a plaster virgin. Its glossy finish shone in the over-bright sunlight as if enamelled together out of some cosmetic foam.

Then Nolan dived from the sun behind Van Eyck. Rolling his black-winged glider past Van Eyck's, he drove through the neck of the Gioconda, and with the flick of a wing toppled the broad-cheeked head. It fell towards the cars below. The features disintegrated into a flaccid mess, sections of the nose and jaw tumbling through the steam. Then wings brushed. Van Eyck fired his spray gun at Nolan, and there was a flurry of torn

fabric. Van Eyck fell from the air, steering his glider down to a broken landing.

I ran over to him. 'Charles, do you have to play von Richthofen? For God's sake, leave each other alone!'

Van Eyck waved me away. 'Talk to Nolan, major. I'm not responsible for his air piracy.' He stood in the cockpit, gazing over the cars as the shreds of fabric fell around him.

I walked back to my car, deciding that the time had come to disband the cloud-sculptors of Coral D. Fifty yards away the young secretary in the Rolls-Royce had stepped from the car and beckoned to me. Through the open door her mistress watched me with her jewelled eyes. Her white hair lay in a coil over one shoulder like a nacreous serpent.

I carried my flying helmet down to the young woman. Above a high forehead her auburn hair was swept back in a defensive bun, as if she were deliberately concealing part of herself. She stared with puzzled eyes at the helmet held out in front of her.

'I don't want to fly – what is it?'

'A grace,' I explained. 'For the repose of Michelangelo, Ed Keinholz and the cloud-sculptors of Coral D.'

'Oh, my God. I think the chauffeur's the only one with any *money*. Look, do you perform anywhere else?'

'Perform?' I glanced from this pretty and agreeable young woman to the pale chimera with jewelled eyes in the dim compartment of the Rolls. She was watching the headless figure of the Mona Lisa as it moved across the desert floor towards Vermilion Sands. 'We're not a professional troupe, as you've probably guessed. And obviously we'd need some fair-weather cloud. Where, exactly?'

'At Lagoon West.' She took a snakeskin diary from her handbag. 'Miss Chanel is holding a series of garden parties. She wondered if you'd care to perform. Of course there would be a large fee.'

'Chanel . . . Leonora Chanel, the . . . ?'

The young woman's face again took on its defensive posture, dissociating her from whatever might follow. 'Miss Chanel is at Lagoon West for the summer. By the way, there's one condition I must point out – Miss Chanel will provide the sole subject matter. You do understand?'

Fifty yards away Van Eyck was dragging his damaged glider towards my car. Nolan had landed, a caricature of Cyrano abandoned in mid-air. Petit Manuel limped to and fro, gathering together the equipment. In the fading afternoon light they resembled a threadbare circus troupe.

'All right,' I agreed. 'I take your point. But what about the clouds, Miss –?'

'Lafferty. Beatrice Lafferty. Miss Chanel will provide the clouds.'

I walked around the cars with the helmet, then divided the money between Nolan, Van Eyck and Manuel. They stood in the gathering dusk, the few bills in their hands, watching the highway below.

Leonora Chanel stepped from the limousine and strolled into the desert. Her white-haired figure in its cobra-skin coat wandered among the dunes. Sand-rays lifted around her, disturbed by the random movements of this sauntering phantasm of the burnt afternoon. Ignoring their open stings around her legs, she was gazing up at the aerial bestiary dissolving in the sky, and at the white skull a mile away over Lagoon West that had smeared itself across the sky.

At the time I first saw her, watching the cloud-sculptors of Coral D, I had only a half-formed impression of Leonora Chanel. The daughter of one of the world's leading financiers, she was an heiress both in her own right and on the death of her husband, a shy Monacan aristocrat, Comte Louis Chanel. The mysterious circumstances of his death at Cap Ferrat on the Riviera, officially described as suicide, had placed Leonora in a spotlight of publicity and gossip. She had escaped by wandering endlessly across the globe, from her walled villa in Tangiers to an Alpine mansion in the snows above Pontresina, and from there to Palm Springs, Seville and Mykonos.

During these years of exile something of her character emerged from the magazine and newspaper photographs: moodily visiting a Spanish charity with the Duchess of Alba, or seated with Soraya and other members of café society on the terrace of Dali's villa at Port Lligat, her self-regarding face gazing out with its jewelled eyes at the diamond sea of the Costa Brava.

Inevitably her Garbo-like role seemed over-calculated, forever undermined by the suspicions of her own hand in her husband's death. The count had been an introspective playboy who piloted his own aircraft to archaeological sites in the Peloponnese and whose mistress, a beautiful young Lebanese, was one of the world's pre-eminent keyboard interpreters of Bach. Why this reserved and pleasant man should have committed suicide was never made plain. What promised to be a significant exhibit at the coroner's inquest, a multilated easel portrait of Leonora on which he was working, was accidentally destroyed before the hearing. Perhaps the painting revealed more of Leonora's character than she chose to see.

A week later, as I drove out to Lagoon West on the morning of the first garden party, I could well understand why Leonora Chanel had come to Vermilion Sands, to this bizarre, sand-bound resort with its lethargy, beach fatigue and shifting perspectives. Sonic statues grew wild along the beach, their voices keening as I swept past along the shore road. The fused silica on the surface of the lake formed an immense rainbow mirror that reflected the deranged colours of the sand-reefs, more vivid even than the cinnabar and cyclamen wing-panels of the cloud-gliders overhead. They soared in the sky above the lake like fitful dragonflies as Nolan, Van Eyck and Petit Manuel flew them from Coral D.

We had entered an inflamed landscape. Half a mile away the angular cornices of the summer house jutted into the vivid air as if distorted

by some faulty junction of time and space. Behind it, like an exhausted volcano, a broad-topped mesa rose into the glazed air, its shoulders lifting the thermal currents high off the heated lake.

Envying Nolan and little Manuel these tremendous updraughts, more powerful than any we had known at Coral D, I drove towards the villa. Then the haze cleared along the beach and I saw the clouds.

A hundred feet above the roof of the mesa, they hung like the twisted pillows of a sleepless giant. Columns of turbulent air moved within the clouds, boiling upwards to the anvil heads like liquid in a cauldron. These were not the placid, fair-weather cumulus of Coral D, but storm-nimbus, unstable masses of overheated air that could catch an aircraft and lift it a thousand feet in a few seconds. Here and there the clouds were rimmed with dark bands, their towers crossed by valleys and ravines. They moved across the villa, concealed from the lakeside heat by the haze overhead, then dissolved in a series of violent shifts in the disordered air.

As I entered the drive behind a truck filled with *son et lumière* equipment a dozen members of the staff were straightening lines of gilt chairs on the terrace and unrolling panels of a marquee.

Beatrice Lafferty stepped across the cables. 'Major Parker – there are the clouds we promised you.'

I looked up again at the dark billows hanging like shrouds above the white villa. 'Clouds, Beatrice? Those are tigers, tigers with wings. We're manicurists of the air, not dragon-tamers.'

'Don't worry, a manicure is exactly what you're expected to carry out.' With an arch glance, she added: 'Your men do understand that there's to be only one subject?'

'Miss Chanel herself? Of course.' I took her arm as we walked towards the balcony overlooking the lake. 'You know, I think you enjoy these snide asides. Let the rich choose their materials – marble, bronze, plasma or cloud. Why not? Portraiture has always been a neglected art.'

'My God, not here.' She waited until a steward passed with a tray of tablecloths. 'Carving one's portrait in the sky out of the sun and air – some people might say that smacked of vanity, or even worse sins.'

'You're very mysterious. Such as?'

She played games with her eyes. 'I'll tell you in a month's time when my contract expires. Now, when are your men coming?'

'They're here.' I pointed to the sky over the lake. The three gliders hung in the overheated air, clumps of cloud-cotton drifting past them to dissolve in the haze. They were following a sand-yacht that approached the quay, its tyres throwing up the cerise dust. Behind the helmsman sat Leonora Chanel in a trouser suit of yellow alligator skin, her white hair hidden inside a black raffia toque.

As the helmsman moored the craft Van Eyck and Petit Manuel put on an impromptu performance, shaping the fragments of cloud-cotton a hundred feet above the lake. First Van Eyck carved an orchid, then a heart and a pair of lips, while Manuel fashioned the head of a parakeet,

two identical mice and the letters 'L.C.' As they dived and plunged around her, their wings sometimes touching the lake, Leonora stood on the quay, politely waving at each of these brief confections.

When they landed beside the quay, Leonora waited for Nolan to take one of the clouds, but he was sailing up and down the lake in front of her like a weary bird. Watching this strange chatelaine of Lagoon West, I noticed that she had slipped off into some private reverie, her gaze fixed on Nolan and oblivious of the people around her. Memories, caravels without sails, crossed the shadowy deserts of her burnt-out eyes.

Later that evening Beatrice Lafferty led me into the villa through the library window. There, as Leonora greeted her guests on the terrace, wearing a topless dress of sapphires and organdy, her breasts covered only by their contour jewellery. I saw the portraits that filled the villa. I counted more than twenty, from the formal society portraits in the drawing rooms, one by the President of the Royal Academy, another by Annigoni, to the bizarre psychological studies in the bar and dining room by Dali and Francis Bacon. Everywhere we moved, in the alcoves between the marble semi-columns, in gilt miniatures on the mantelshelves, even in the ascending mural that followed the staircase, we saw the same beautiful self-regarding face. This colossal narcissism seemed to have become her last refuge, the only retreat for her fugitive self in its flight from the world.

Then, in the studio on the roof, we came across a large easel portrait that had just been varnished. The artist had produced a deliberate travesty of the sentimental and powder-blue tints of a fashionable society painter, but beneath this gloss he had visualized Leonora as a dead Medea. The stretched skin below her right cheek, the sharp forehead and slipped mouth gave her the numbed and luminous appearance of a corpse.

My eyes moved to the signature. 'Nolan! My God, were you here when he painted this?'

'It was finished before I came – two months ago. She refused to have it framed.'

'No wonder.' I went over to the window and looked down at the bedrooms hidden behind their awnings. 'Nolan was *here*. The old studio near Coral D was his.'

'But why should Leonora ask him back? They must have –'

'To paint her portrait again. I know Leonora Chanel better than you do, Beatrice. This time, though, the size of the sky.'

We left the library and walked past the cocktails and canapés to where Leonora was welcoming her guests. Nolan stood beside her, wearing a suit of white suede. Now and then he looked down at her as if playing with the possibilities this self-obsessed woman gave to his macabre humour. Leonora clutched at his elbow. With the diamonds fixed around her eyes she reminded me of some archaic priestess. Beneath the contour jewellery her breasts lay like eager snakes.

Van Eyck introduced himself with an exaggerated bow. Behind him came Petit Manuel, his twisted head ducking nervously among the tuxedos.

Leonora's mouth shut in a rictus of distaste. She glanced at the white plaster on my foot. 'Nolan, you fill your world with cripples. Your little dwarf – will he fly too?'

Petit Manuel looked at her with eyes like crushed flowers.

The performance began an hour later. The dark-rimmed clouds were lit by the sun setting behind the mesa, the air crossed by wraiths of cirrus like the gilded frames of the immense paintings to come. Van Eyck's glider rose in the spiral towards the face of the first cloud, stalling and climbing again as the turbulent updraughts threw him across the air.

As the cheekbones began to appear, as smooth and lifeless as carved foam, applause rang out from the guests seated on the terrace. Five minutes later, when Van Eyck's glider swooped down on to the lake, I could see that he had excelled himself. Lit by the searchlights, and with the overture to Tristan sounding from the loudspeakers on the slopes of the mesa, as if inflating this huge bauble, the portrait of Leonora moved overhead, a faint rain falling from it. By luck the cloud remained stable until it passed the shoreline, and then broke up in the evening air as if ripped from the sky by an irritated hand.

Petit Manuel began his ascent, sailing in on a dark-edged cloud like an urchin accosting a bad-tempered matron. He soared to and fro, as if unsure how to shape this unpredictable column of vapour, then began to carve it into the approximate contours of a woman's head. He seemed more nervous than I had ever seen him. As he finished a second round of applause broke out, soon followed by laughter and ironic cheers.

The cloud, sculptured into a flattering likeness of Leonora, had begun to tilt, rotating in the disturbed air. The jaw lengthened, the glazed smile became that of an idiot's. Within a minute the gigantic head of Leonora Chanel hung upside down above us.

Discreetly I ordered the searchlights switched off, and the audience's attention turned to Nolan's black-winged glider as it climbed towards the next cloud. Shards of dissolving tissue fell from the darkening air, the spray concealing whatever ambiguous creation Nolan was carving. To my surprise, the portrait that emerged was wholly lifelike. There was a burst of applause, a few bars of Tannhauser, and the searchlights lit up the elegant head. Standing among her guests, Leonora raised her glass to Nolan's glider.

Puzzled by Nolan's generosity, I looked more closely at the gleaming face, and then realized what he had done. The portrait, with cruel irony, was all too lifelike. The downward turn of Leonora's mouth, the chin held up to smooth her neck, the fall of flesh below her right cheek – all these were carried on the face of the cloud as they had been in his painting in the studio.

Around Leonora the guests were congratulating her on the performance. She was looking up at her portrait as it began to break up over the lake, seeing it for the first time. The veins held the blood in her face.

Then a firework display on the beach blotted out these ambiguities in its pink and blue explosions.

Shortly before dawn Beatrice Lafferty and I walked along the beach among the shells of burnt-out rockets and catherine wheels. On the deserted terrace a few lights shone through the darkness on to the scattered chairs. As we reached the steps a woman's voice cried out somewhere above us. There was the sound of smashed glass. A french window was kicked back, and a dark-haired man in a white suit ran between the tables.

As Nolan disappeared along the drive Leonora Chanel walked out into the centre of the terrace. She looked at the dark clouds surging over the mesa, and with one hand tore the jewels from her eyes. They lay winking on the tiles at her feet. Then the hunched figure of Petit Manuel leapt from his hiding place in the bandstand. He scuttled past, racing on his deformed legs.

An engine started by the gates. Leonora began to walk back to the villa, staring at her broken reflections in the glass below the window. She stopped as a tall, blond-haired man with cold and eager eyes stepped from the sonic statues outside the library. Disturbed by the noise, the statues had begun to whine. As Van Eyck moved towards Leonora they took up the slow beat of his steps.

The next day's performance was the last by the cloud-sculptors of Coral D. All afternoon, before the guests arrived, a dim light lay over the lake. Immense tiers of storm-nimbus were massing behind the mesa, and any performance at all seemed unlikely.

Van Eyck was with Leonora. As I arrived Beatrice Lafferty was watching their sand-yacht carry them unevenly across the lake, its sails whipped by the squalls.

'There's no sign of Nolan or little Manuel,' she told me. 'The party starts in three hours.'

I took her arm. 'The party's already over. When you're finished here, Bea, come and live with me at Coral D. I'll teach you to sculpt the clouds.'

Van Eyck and Leonora came ashore half an hour later. Van Eyck stared through my face as he brushed past. Leonora clung to his arm, the day-jewels around her eyes scattering their hard light across the terrace.

By eight, when the first guests began to appear, Nolan and Petit Manuel had still not arrived. On the terrace the evening was warm and lamplit, but overhead the storm-clouds sidled past each other like uneasy giants. I walked up the slope to where the gliders were tethered. Their wings shivered in the updraughts.

Barely half a minute after he rose into the darkening air, dwarfed by an

immense tower of storm-nimbus, Charles Van Eyck was spinning towards the ground, his glider toppled by the crazed air. He recovered fifty feet from the villa and climbed on the updraughts from the lake, well away from the spreading chest of the cloud. He soared in again. As Leonora and her guests watched from their seats the glider was hurled back over their heads in an explosion of vapour, then fell towards the lake with a broken wing.

I walked towards Leonora. Standing by the balcony were Nolan and Petit Manuel, watching Van Eyck climb from the cockpit of his glider three hundred yards away.

To Nolan I said: 'Why bother to come? Don't tell me you're going to fly?'

Nolan leaned against the rail, hands in the pockets of his suit. 'I'm not – that's exactly why I'm here, major.'

Leonora was wearing an evening dress of peacock feathers that lay around her legs in an immense train. The hundreds of eyes gleamed in the electric air before the storm, sheathing her body in their blue flames.

'Miss Chanel, the clouds are like madmen,' I apologized. 'There's a storm on its way.'

She looked up at me with unsettled eyes. 'Don't you people expect to take risks?' She gestured at the storm-nimbus that swirled over our heads. 'For clouds like these I need a Michelangelo of the sky . . . What about Nolan? Is he too frightened as well?'

As she shouted his name Nolan stared at her, then turned his back to us. The light over Lagoon West had changed. Half the lake was covered by a dim pall.

There was a tug on my sleeve. Petit Manuel looked up at me with his crafty child's eyes. 'Major, I can go. Let me take the glider.'

'Manuel, for God's sake. You'll kill –'

He darted between the gilt chairs. Leonora frowned as he plucked her wrist.

'Miss Chanel . . .' His loose mouth formed an encouraging smile. 'I'll sculpt for you. Right now, a big storm-cloud, eh?'

She stared down at him, half-repelled by this eager hunchback ogling her beside the hundred eyes of her peacock train. Van Eyck was limping back to the beach from his wrecked glider. I guessed that in some strange way Manuel was pitting himself against Van Eyck.

Leonora grimaced, as if swallowing some poisonous phlegm. 'Major Parker, tell him to –' She glanced at the dark cloud boiling over the mesa like the effuvium of some black-hearted volcano. 'Wait! Let's see what the little cripple can do!' She turned on Manuel with an over-bright smile. 'Go on, then. Let's see you sculpt a whirlwind!'

In her face the diagram of bones formed a geometry of murder.

Nolan ran past across the terrace, his feet crushing the peacock feathers as Leonora laughed. We tried to stop Manuel, but he raced ahead up the slope. Stung by Leonora's taunt, he skipped among the rocks, disappearing

from sight in the darkening air. On the terrace a small crowd gathered to watch.

The yellow and tangerine glider rose into the sky and climbed across the face of the storm-cloud. Fifty yards from the dark billows it was buffeted by the shifting air, but Manuel soared in and began to cut away at the dark face. Drops of black rain fell across the terrace at our feet.

The first outline of a woman's head appeared, satanic eyes lit by the open vents in the cloud, a sliding mouth like a dark smear as the huge billows boiled forwards. Nolan shouted in warning from the lake as he climbed into his glider. A moment later little Manuel's craft was lifted by a powerful updraught and tossed over the roof of the cloud. Fighting the insane air, Manuel plunged the glider downwards and drove into the cloud again. Then its immense face opened, and in a sudden spasm the cloud surged forward and swallowed the glider.

There was silence on the terrace as the crushed body of the craft revolved in the centre of the cloud. It moved over our heads, dismembered pieces of the wings and fuselage churned about in the dissolving face. As it reached the lake the cloud began its violent end. Pieces of the face slewed sideways, the mouth was torn off, an eye exploded. It vanished in a last brief squall.

The pieces of Petit Manuel's glider fell from the bright air.

Beatrice Lafferty and I drove across the lake to collect Manuel's body. After the spectacle of his death within the exploding replica of their hostess's face, the guests began to leave. Within minutes the drive was full of cars. Leonora watched them go, standing with Van Eyck among the deserted tables.

Beatrice said nothing as we drove out. The pieces of the shattered glider lay over the fused sand, tags of canvas and broken struts, control lines tied into knots. Ten yards from the cockpit I found Petit Manuel's body, lying in a wet ball like a drowned monkey.

I carried him back to the sand-yacht.

'Raymond!' Beatrice pointed to the shore. Storm-clouds were massed along the entire length of the lake, and the first flashes of lightning were striking in the hills behind the mesa. In the electric air the villa had lost its glitter. Half a mile away a tornado was moving along the valley floor, its trunk swaying towards the lake.

The first gust of air struck the yacht. Beatrice shouted again: 'Raymond! Nolan's there – he's flying inside it!'

Then I saw the black-winged glider circling under the umbrella of the tornado, Nolan himself riding in the whirlwind. His wings held steady in the revolving air around the funnel. Like a pilot fish he soared in, as if steering the tornado towards Leonora's villa.

Twenty seconds later, when it struck the house, I lost sight of him. An explosion of dark air overwhelmed the villa, a churning centrifuge of shattered chairs and tiles that burst over the roof. Beatrice and I ran from

the yacht, and lay together in a fault in the glass surface. As the tornado moved away, fading into the storm-filled sky, a dark squall hung over the wrecked villa, now and then flicking the debris into the air. Shreds of canvas and peacock feathers fell around us.

We waited half an hour before approaching the house. Hundreds of smashed glasses and broken chairs littered the terrace. At first I could see no signs of Leonora, although her face was everywhere, the portraits with their slashed profiles strewn on the damp tiles. An eddying smile floated towards me from the disturbed air, and wrapped itself around my leg.

Leonora's body lay among the broken tables near the bandstand, half-wrapped in a bleeding canvas. Her face was as bruised now as the storm-cloud Manuel had tried to carve.

We found Van Eyck in the wreck of the marquee. He was suspended by the neck from a tangle of electric wiring, his pale face wreathed in a noose of light bulbs. The current flowed intermittently through the wiring, lighting up the coloured globes.

I leaned against the overturned Rolls, holding Beatrice's shoulders. 'There's no sign of Nolan – no pieces of his glider.'

'Poor man. Raymond, he was driving that whirlwind here. Somehow he was controlling it.'

I walked across the damp terrace to where Leonora lay. I began to cover her with the shreds of canvas, the torn faces of herself.

I took Beatrice Lafferty to live with me in Nolan's studio in the desert near Coral D. We heard no more of Nolan and never flew the gliders again. The clouds carry too many memories. Three months ago a man who saw the derelict gliders outside the studio stopped near Coral D and walked across to us. He told us he had seen a man flying a glider in the sky high above Red Beach, carving the strato-cirrus into images of jewels and children's faces. Once there was a dwarf's head.

On reflection, that sounds rather like Nolan, so perhaps he managed to get away from the tornado. In the evenings Beatrice and I sit among the sonic statues, listening to their voices as the fair-weather clouds rise above Coral D, waiting for a man in a dark-winged glider, perhaps painted like candy now, who will come in on the wind and carve for us images of seahorses and unicorns, dwarfs and jewels and children's faces.

1967

WHY I WANT TO FUCK RONALD REAGAN

During these assassination fantasies
Ronald Reagan and the conceptual auto-disaster. Numerous studies have been conducted upon patients in terminal paresis (G.P.I.), placing Reagan in a series of simulated auto-crashes, e.g. multiple pile-ups, head-on collisions, motorcade attacks (fantasies of Presidential assassinations remained a continuing preoccupation, subjects showing a marked polymorphic fixation on windshields and rear trunk assemblies). Powerful erotic fantasies of an anal-sadistic character surrounded the image of the Presidential contender. Subjects were required to construct the optimum auto-disaster victim by placing a replica of Reagan's head on the unretouched photographs of crash fatalities. In 82 per cent of cases massive rear-end collisions were selected with a preference for expressed faecal matter and rectal haemorrhages. Further tests were conducted to define the optimum model-year. These indicate that a three-year model lapse with child victims provide the maximum audience excitation (confirmed by manufacturers' studies of the optimum auto-disaster). It is hoped to construct a rectal modulus of Reagan and the auto-disaster of maximized audience arousal.

Tallis became increasingly obsessed
Motion picture studies of Ronald Reagan reveal characteristic patterns of facial tonus and musculature associated with homo-erotic behaviour. The continuing tension of buccal sphincters and the recessive tongue role tally with earlier studies of facial rigidity (cf., Adolf Hitler, Nixon). Slow-motion cine-films of campaign speeches exercised a marked erotic effect upon an audience of spastic children. Even with mature adults the verbal material was found to have minimal effect, as demonstrated by substitution of an edited tape giving diametrically opposed opinions. Parallel films of rectal images revealed a sharp upsurge in anti-Semitic and concentration camp fantasies.

with the pudenda of the Presidential contender
Incidence of orgasms in fantasies of sexual intercourse with Ronald Reagan. Patients were provided with assembly kit photographs of sexual partners during intercourse. In each case Reagan's face was superimposed upon the original partner. Vaginal intercourse with 'Reagan' proved uniformly disappointing, producing orgasm in 2 per cent of subjects.

Axillary, buccal, navel, aural and orbital modes produced proximal erections. The preferred mode of entry overwhelmingly proved to be the rectal. After a preliminary course in anatomy it was found that caecum and transverse colon also provided excellent sites for excitation. In an extreme 12 per cent of cases, the simulated anus of post-colostomy surgery generated spontaneous orgasm in 98 per cent of penetrations. Multiple-track cine-films were constructed of 'Reagan' in intercourse during (a) campaign speeches, (b) rear-end auto-collisions with one and three-year-old model changes, (c) with rear-exhaust assemblies, (d) with Vietnamese child-atrocity victims.

mediated to him by a thousand television screens.

Sexual fantasies in connection with Ronald Reagan. The genitalia of the Presidential contender exercised a continuing fascination. A series of imaginary genitalia were constructed using (a) the mouth-parts of Jacqueline Kennedy, (b) a Cadillac rear-exhaust vent, (c) the assembly kit prepuce of President Johnson, (d) a child-victim of sexual assault. In 89 per cent of cases, the constructed genitalia generated a high incidence of self-induced orgasm. Tests indicate the masturbatory nature of the Presidential contender's posture. Dolls consisting of plastic models of Reagan's alternate genitalia were found to have a disturbing effect on deprived children.

The motion picture studies of Ronald Reagan

Reagan's hairstyle. Studies were conducted on the marked fascination exercised by the Presidential contender's hairstyle. 65 per cent of male subjects made positive connections between the hairstyle and their own pubic hair. A series of optimum hairstyles were constructed.

created a scenario of the conceptual orgasm,

The conceptual role of Reagan. Fragments of Reagan's cinetized postures were used in the construction of model psychodramas in which the Reagan-figure played the role of husband, doctor, insurance salesman, marriage counsellor, etc. The failure of these roles to express any meaning reveals the non-functional character of Reagan. Reagan's success therefore indicates society's periodic need to re-conceptualize its political leaders. Reagan thus appears as a series of posture concepts, basic equations which re-formulate the roles of aggression and anality.

a unique ontology of violence and disaster.

Reagan's personality. The profound anality of the Presidential contender may be expected to dominate the United States in the coming years. By contrast the late J.F. Kennedy remained the prototype of the oral object, usually conceived in pre-pubertal terms. In further studies sadistic psychopaths were given the task of devising sex fantasies involving Reagan. Results confirm the probability of Presidential figures being perceived

primarily in genital terms; the face of L.B. Johnson is clearly genital in significant appearance – the nasal prepuce, scrotal jaw, etc. Faces were seen as either circumcised (JFK, Khrushchev) or uncircumcised (LBJ, Adenauer). In assembly kit tests Reagan's face was uniformly perceived as a penile erection. Patients were encouraged to devise the optimum sex-death of Ronald Reagan.

1968

THE DEAD ASTRONAUT

Cape Kennedy has gone now, its gantries rising from the deserted dunes. Sand has come in across the Banana River, filling the creeks and turning the old space complex into a wilderness of swamps and broken concrete. In the summer, hunters build their blinds in the wrecked staff-cars; but by early November, when Judith and I arrived, the entire area was abandoned. Beyond Cocoa Beach, where I stopped the car, the ruined motels were half hidden in the saw grass. The launching towers rose into the evening air like the rusting ciphers of some forgotten algebra of the sky.

'The perimeter fence is half a mile ahead,' I said. 'We'll wait here until it's dark. Do you feel better now?'

Judith was staring at an immense funnel of cerise cloud that seemed to draw the day with it below the horizon, taking the light from her faded blonde hair. The previous afternoon, in the hotel in Tampa, she had fallen ill briefly with some unspecified complaint.

'What about the money?' she asked. 'They may want more, now that we're here.'

'Five thousand dollars? Ample, Judith. These relic hunters are a dying breed – few people are interested in Cape Kennedy any longer. What's the matter?'

Her thin fingers were fretting at the collar of her suede jacket. 'I . . . it's just that perhaps I should have worn black.'

'Why? Judith, this isn't a funeral. For heaven's sake, Robert died twenty years ago. I know all he meant to us, but . . .'

Judith was staring at the debris of tyres and abandoned cars, her pale eyes becalmed in her drawn face. 'Philip, don't you understand, he's coming back now. Someone's got to be here. The memorial service over the radio was a horrible travesty – my God, that priest would have had a shock if Robert had talked back to him. There ought to be a full-scale committee, not just you and I and these empty nightclubs.'

In a firmer voice, I said: 'Judith, there would be a committee – *if* we told the NASA Foundation what we know. The remains would be interred in the NASA vault at Arlington, there'd be a band – even the President might be there. There's still time.'

I waited for her to reply, but she was watching the gantries fade into the night sky. Fifteen years ago, when the dead astronaut orbiting the earth in his burned-out capsule had been forgotten, Judith had constituted herself

a memorial committee of one. Perhaps, in a few days, when she finally held the last relics of Robert Hamilton's body in her own hands, she would come to terms with her obsession.

'Philip, over there! Is that –'

High in the western sky, between the constellations Cepheus and Cassiopeia, a point of white light moved towards us, like a lost star searching for its zodiac. Within a few minutes, it passed overhead, its faint beacon setting behind the cirrus over the sea.

'It's all right, Judith.' I showed her the trajectory timetables pencilled into my diary. 'The relic hunters read these orbits off the sky better than any computer. They must have been watching the pathways for years.'

'Who was it?'

'A Russian woman pilot – Valentina Prokrovna. She was sent up from a site near the Urals twenty-five years ago to work on a television relay system.'

'Television? I hope they enjoyed the programme.'

This callous remark, uttered by Judith as she stepped from the car, made me realize once again her special motives for coming to Cape Kennedy. I watched the capsule of the dead woman disappear over the dark Atlantic stream, as always moved by the tragic but serene spectacle of one of these ghostly voyagers coming back after so many years from the tideways of space. All I knew of this dead Russian was her code name: Seagull. Yet, for some reason, I was glad to be there as she came down. Judith, on the other hand, felt nothing of this. During all the years she had sat in the garden in the cold evenings, too tired to bring herself to bed, she had been sustained by her concern for one only of the twelve dead astronauts orbiting the night sky.

As she waited, her back to the sea, I drove the car into the garage of an abandoned nightclub fifty yards from the road. From the trunk I took out two suitcases. One, a light travel-case, contained clothes for Judith and myself. The other, fitted with a foil inlay, reinforcing straps and a second handle, was empty.

We set off north towards the perimeter fence, like two late visitors arriving at a resort abandoned years earlier.

It was twenty years now since the last rockets had left their launching platforms at Cape Kennedy. At the time, NASA had already moved Judith and me – I was a senior flight-programmer – to the great new Planetary Space Complex in New Mexico. Shortly after our arrival, we had met one of the trainee astronauts, Robert Hamilton. After two decades, all I could remember of this over-polite but sharp-eyed young man was his albino skin, so like Judith's pale eyes and opal hair, the same cold gene that crossed them both with its arctic pallor. We had been close friends for barely six weeks. Judith's infatuation was one of those confused sexual impulses that well-brought-up young women express in their own naive way; and as I watched them swim and play tennis together, I felt not

so much resentful as concerned to sustain the whole passing illusion for her.

A year later, Robert Hamilton was dead. He had returned to Cape Kennedy for the last military flights before the launching grounds were closed. Three hours after lift-off, a freak meteorite collision ruptured his oxygen support system. He had lived on in his suit for another five hours. Although calm at first, his last radio transmissions were an incoherent babble Judith and I had never been allowed to hear.

A dozen astronauts had died in orbital accidents, their capsules left to revolve through the night sky like the stars of a new constellation; and at first, Judith had shown little response. Later, after her miscarriage, the figure of this dead astronaut circling the sky above us re-emerged in her mind as an obsession with time. For hours, she would stare at the bedroom clock, as if waiting for something to happen.

Five years later, after I resigned from NASA, we made our first trip to Cape Kennedy. A few military units still guarded the derelict gantries, but already the former launching site was being used as a satellite graveyard. As the dead capsules lost orbital velocity, they homed on to the master radio beacon. As well as the American vehicles, Russian and French satellites in the joint Euro-American space projects were brought down here, the burned-out hulks of the capsules exploding across the cracked concrete.

Already, too, the relic hunters were at Cape Kennedy, scouring the burning saw grass for instrument panels and flying suits and – most valuable of all – the mummified corpses of the dead astronauts.

These blackened fragments of collar-bone and shin, kneecap and rib, were the unique relics of the space age, as treasured as the saintly bones of medieval shrines. After the first fatal accident in space, public outcry demanded that these orbiting biers be brought down to earth. Unfortunately, when a returning moon rocket crashed into the Kalahari Desert, aboriginal tribesmen broke into the vehicle. Believing the crew to be dead gods, they cut off the eight hands and vanished into the bush. It had taken two years to track them down. From then on, the capsules were left in orbit to burn out on re-entry.

Whatever remains survived the crash landings in the satellite graveyard were scavenged by the relic hunters of Cape Kennedy. This band of nomads had lived for years in the wrecked cars and motels, stealing their icons under the feet of the wardens who patrolled the concrete decks. In early October, when a former NASA colleague told me that Robert Hamilton's satellite was becoming unstable, I drove down to Tampa and began to inquire about the purchase price of Robert's mortal remains. Five thousand dollars was a small price to pay for laying his ghost to rest in Judith's mind.

Eight hundred yards from the road, we crossed the perimeter fence. Crushed by the dunes, long sections of the twenty-foot-high palisade had collapsed, the saw grass growing through the steel mesh. Below

us, the boundary road passed a derelict guardhouse and divided into two paved tracks. As we waited at this rendezvous, the headlamps of the wardens' half-tracks flared across the gantries near the beach.

Five minutes later, a small dark-faced man climbed from the rear seat of a car buried in the sand fifty yards away. Head down, he scuttled over to us.

'Mr and Mrs Groves?' After a pause to peer into our faces, he introduced himself tersely: 'Quinton. Sam Quinton.'

As he shook hands, his clawlike fingers examined the bones of my wrist and forearm. His sharp nose made circles in the air. He had the eyes of a nervous bird, forever searching the dunes and the grass. An Army webbing belt hung around his patched black denims. He moved his hands restlessly in the air, as if conducting a chamber ensemble hidden behind the sand hills, and I noticed his badly scarred palms. Huge weals formed pale stars in the darkness.

For a moment, he seemed disappointed by us, almost reluctant to move on. Then he set off at a brisk pace across the dunes, now and then leaving us to blunder about helplessly. Half an hour later, when we entered a shallow basin near a farm of alkali-settling beds, Judith and I were exhausted, dragging the suitcases over the broken tyres and barbed wire.

A group of cabins had been dismantled from their original sites along the beach and re-erected in the basin. Isolated rooms tilted on the sloping sand, mantelpieces and flowered paper decorating the outer walls.

The basin was full of salvaged space material: sections of capsules, heat shields, antennas and parachute canisters. Near the dented hull of a weather satellite, two sallow-faced men in sheepskin jackets sat on a car seat. The older wore a frayed Air Force cap over his eyes. With his scarred hands, he was polishing the steel visor of a space helmet. The other, a young man with a faint beard hiding his mouth, watched us approach with the detached and neutral gaze of an undertaker.

We entered the largest of the cabins, two rooms taken off the rear of a beach-house. Quinton lit a paraffin lamp. He pointed around the dingy interior. 'You'll be . . . comfortable,' he said without conviction. As Judith stared at him with unconcealed distaste, he added pointedly: 'We don't get many visitors.'

I put the suitcases on the metal bed. Judith walked into the kitchen and Quinton began to open the empty case.

'It's in here?'

I took the two packets of $100 bills from my jacket. When I had handed them to him, I said: 'The suitcase is for the . . . remains. Is it big enough?'

Quinton peered at me through the ruby light, as if baffled by our presence there. 'You could have spared yourself the trouble. They've been up there a long time, Mr Groves. After the impact' – for some reason, he cast a lewd eye in Judith's direction – 'there might be enough for a chess set.'

When he had gone, I went into the kitchen. Judith stood by the stove, hands on a carton of canned food. She was staring through the window at the metal salvage, refuse of the sky that still carried Robert Hamilton in its rusty centrifuge. For a moment, I had the feeling that the entire landscape of the earth was covered with rubbish and that here, at Cape Kennedy, we had found its source.

I held her shoulders. 'Judith, is there any point in this? Why don't we go back to Tampa? I could drive here in ten days' time when it's all over –'

She turned from me, her hands rubbing the suede where I had marked it. 'Philip, I want to be here – no matter how unpleasant. Can't you understand?'

At midnight, when I finished making a small meal for us, she was standing on the concrete wall of the settling tank. The three relic hunters sitting on their car seats watched her without moving, scarred hands like flames in the darkness.

At three o'clock that morning, as we lay awake on the narrow bed, Valentina Prokrovna came down from the sky. Enthroned on a bier of burning aluminium three hundred yards wide, she soared past on her final orbit. When I went out into the night air, the relic hunters had gone. From the rim of the settling tank, I watched them race away among the dunes, leaping like hares over the tyres and wire.

I went back to the cabin. 'Judith, she's coming down. Do you want to watch?'

Her blonde hair tied within a white towel, Judith lay on the bed, staring at the cracked plasterboard ceiling. Shortly after four o'clock, as I sat beside her, a phosphorescent light filled the hollow. There was the distant sound of explosions, muffled by the high wall of the dunes. Lights flared, followed by the noise of engines and sirens.

At dawn the relic hunters returned, hands wrapped in makeshift bandages, dragging their booty with them.

After this melancholy rehearsal, Judith entered a period of sudden and unexpected activity. As if preparing the cabin for some visitor, she rehung the curtains and swept out the two rooms with meticulous care, even bringing herself to ask Quinton for a bottle of cleanser. For hours she sat at the dressing table, brushing and shaping her hair, trying out first one style and then another. I watched her feel the hollows of her cheeks, searching for the contours of a face that had vanished twenty years ago. As she spoke about Robert Hamilton, she almost seemed worried that she would appear old to him. At other times, she referred to Robert as if he were a child, the son she and I had never been able to conceive since her miscarriage. These different roles followed one another like scenes in some private psychodrama. However, without knowing it, for years Judith and I had used Robert Hamilton for our own reasons. Waiting for him to land, and well aware

that after this Judith would have no one to turn to except myself, I said nothing.

Meanwhile, the relic hunters worked on the fragments of Valentina Prokrovna's capsule: the blistered heat shield, the chassis of the radio-telemetry unit and several cans of film that recorded her collision and act of death (these, if still intact, would fetch the highest prices, films of horrific and dreamlike violence played in the underground cinemas of Los Angeles, London and Moscow). Passing the next cabin, I saw a tattered silver space-suit spread-eagled on two automobile seats. Quinton and the relic hunters knelt beside it, their arms deep inside the legs and sleeves, gazing at me with the rapt and sensitive eyes of jewellers.

An hour before dawn, I was awakened by the sound of engines along the beach. In the darkness, the three relic hunters crouched by the settling tank, their pinched faces lit by the headlamps. A long convoy of trucks and half-tracks was moving into the launching ground. Soldiers jumped down from the tailboards, unloading tents and supplies.

'What are they doing?' I asked Quinton. 'Are they looking for us?'

The old man cupped a scarred hand over his eyes. 'It's the Army,' he said uncertainly. 'Manoeuvres, maybe. They haven't been here before like this.'

'What about Hamilton?' I gripped his bony arm. 'Are you sure –'

He pushed me away with a show of nervous temper. 'We'll get him first. Don't worry, he'll be coming sooner than they think.'

Two nights later, as Quinton prophesied, Robert Hamilton began his final descent. From the dunes near the settling tanks, we watched him emerge from the stars on his last run. Reflected in the windows of the buried cars, a thousand images of the capsule flared in the saw grass around us. Behind the satellite, a wide fan of silver spray opened in a phantom wake.

In the Army encampment by the gantries, there was a surge of activity. A blaze of headlamps crossed the concrete lanes. Since the arrival of these military units, it had become plain to me, if not to Quinton, that far from being on manoeuvres, they were preparing for the landing of Robert Hamilton's capsule. A dozen half-tracks had been churning around the dunes, setting fire to the abandoned cabins and crushing the old car bodies. Platoons of soldiers were repairing the perimeter fence and replacing the sections of metalled road that the relic hunters had dismantled.

Shortly after midnight, at an elevation of forty-two degrees in the north-west, betwen Lyra and Hercules, Robert Hamilton appeared for the last time. As Judith stood up and shouted into the night air, an immense blade of light cleft the sky. The expanding corona sped towards us like a gigantic signal flare, illuminating every fragment of the landscape.

'Mrs Groves!' Quinton darted after Judith and pulled her down into the grass as she ran towards the approaching satellite. Three hundred

yards away, the silhouette of a half-track stood out on an isolated dune, its feeble spotlights drowned by the glare.

With a low metallic sigh, the burning capsule of the dead astronaut soared over our heads, the vaporizing metal pouring from its hull. A few seconds later, as I shielded my eyes, an explosion of detonating sand rose from the ground behind me. A curtain of dust lifted into the darkening air like a vast spectre of powdered bone. The sounds of the impact rolled across the dunes. Near the launching gantries, fires flickered where fragments of the capsule had landed. A pall of phosphorescing gas hung in the air, particles within it beading and winking.

Judith had gone, running after the relic hunters through the swerving spotlights. When I caught up with them, the last fires of the explosion were dying among the gantries. The capsule had landed near the old Atlas launching pads, forming a shallow crater fifty yards in diameter. The slopes were scattered with glowing particles, sparkling like fading eyes. Judith ran distraughtly up and down, searching the fragments of smouldering metal.

Someone struck my shoulder. Quinton and his men, hot ash on their scarred hands, ran past like a troop of madmen, eyes wild in the crazed night. As we darted away through the flaring spotlights, I looked back at the beach. The gantries were enveloped in a pale-silver sheen that hovered there, and then moved away like a dying wraith over the sea.

At dawn, as the engines growled among the dunes, we collected the last remains of Robert Hamilton. The old man came into our cabin. As Judith watched from the kitchen, drying her hands on a towel, he gave me a cardboard shoe-box.

I held the box in my hands. 'Is this all you could get?'

'It's all there was. Look at them, if you want.'

'That's all right. We'll be leaving in half an hour.'

He shook his head. 'Not now. They're all around. If you move, they'll find us.'

He waited for me to open the shoe-box, then grimaced and went out into the pale light.

We stayed for another four days, as the Army patrols searched the surrounding dunes. Day and night, the half-tracks lumbered among the wrecked cars and cabins. Once, as I watched with Quinton from a fallen water tower, a half-track and two jeeps came within four hundred yards of the basin, held back only by the stench from the settling beds and the cracked concrete causeways.

During this time, Judith sat in the cabin, the shoe-box on her lap. She said nothing to me, as if she had lost all interest in me and the salvage-filled hollow at Cape Kennedy. Mechanically, she combed her hair, making and remaking her face.

On the second day, I came in after helping Quinton bury the cabins to their windows in the sand. Judith was standing by the table.

The shoe-box was open. In the centre of the table lay a pile of charred sticks, as if she had tried to light a small fire. Then I realized what was there. As she stirred the ash with her fingers, grey flakes fell from the joints, revealing the bony points of a clutch of ribs, a right hand and shoulder blade.

She looked at me with puzzled eyes. 'They're black,' she said.

Holding her in my arms, I lay with her on the bed. A loudspeaker reverberated among the dunes, fragments of the amplified commands drumming at the panes.

When they moved away, Judith said: 'We can go now.'

'In a little while, when it's clear. What about these?'

'Bury them. Anywhere, it doesn't matter.' She seemed calm at last, giving me a brief smile, as if to agree that this grim charade was at last over.

Yet, when I had packed the bones into the shoe-box, scraping up Robert Hamilton's ash with a dessert spoon, she kept it with her, carrying it into the kitchen while she prepared our meals.

It was on the third day that we fell ill.

After a long, noise-filled night, I found Judith sitting in front of the mirror, combing thick clumps of hair from her scalp. Her mouth was open, as if her lips were stained with acid. As she dusted the loose hair from her lap, I was struck by the leprous whiteness of her face.

Standing up with an effort, I walked listlessly into the kitchen and stared at the saucepan of cold coffee. A sense of indefinable exhaustion had come over me, as if the bones in my body had softened and lost their rigidity. On the lapels of my jacket, loose hair lay like spinning waste.

'Philip . . .' Judith swayed towards me. 'Do you feel – What is it?'

'The water.' I poured the coffee into the sink and massaged my throat. 'It must be fouled.'

'Can we leave?' She put a hand up to her forehead. Her brittle nails brought down a handful of frayed ash hair. 'Philip, for God's sake – I'm losing all my hair!'

Neither of us was able to eat. After forcing myself through a few slices of cold meat, I went out and vomited behind the cabin.

Quinton and his men were crouched by the wall of the settling tank. As I walked towards them, steadying myself against the hull of the weather satellite, Quinton came down. When I told him that the water supplies were contaminated, he stared at me with his hard bird's eyes.

Half an hour later, they were gone.

The next day, our last there, we were worse. Judith lay on the bed, shivering in her jacket, the shoe-box held in one hand. I spent hours searching for fresh water in the cabins. Exhausted, I could barely cross the sandy basin. The Army patrols were closer. By now, I could hear the hard gear-changes

of the half-tracks. The sounds from the loudspeakers drummed like fists on my head.

Then, as I looked down at Judith from the cabin doorway, a few words stuck for a moment in my mind.

'. . . *contaminated area . . . evacuate . . . radioactive . . .*'

I walked forward and pulled the box from Judith's hands.

'Philip . . .' She looked up at me weakly. 'Give it back to me.'

Her face was a puffy mask. On her wrists, white flecks were forming. Her left hand reached towards me like the claw of a cadaver.

I shook the box with blunted anger. The bones rattled inside. 'For God's sake, it's *this*! Don't you see – why we're ill?'

'Philip – where are the others? The old man. Get them to help you.'

'They've gone. They went yesterday, I told you.' I let the box fall on to the table. The lid broke off, spilling the ribs tied together like a bundle of firewood. 'Quinton knew what was happening – why the Army is here. They're trying to warn us.'

'What do you mean?' Judith sat up, the focus of her eyes sustained only by a continuous effort. 'Don't let them take Robert. Bury him here somewhere. We'll come back later.'

'Judith!' I bent over the bed and shouted hoarsely at her. 'Don't you realize – there was a *bomb* on board! Robert Hamilton was carrying an atomic weapon!' I pulled back the curtains from the window. 'My God, what a joke. For twenty years, I put up with him because I couldn't ever be really sure . . .'

'Philip . . .'

'Don't worry, I used him – thinking about him was the only thing that kept us going. And all the time, he was waiting up there to pay us back!'

There was a rumble of exhaust outside. A half-track with red crosses on its doors and hood had reached the edge of the basin. Two men in vinyl suits jumped down, counters raised in front of them.

'Judith, before we go, tell me . . . I never asked you –'

Judith was sitting up, touching the hair on her pillow. One half of her scalp was almost bald. She stared at her weak hands with their silvering skin. On her face was an expression I had never seen before, the dumb anger of betrayal.

As she looked at me, and at the bones scattered across the table, I knew my answer.

1968

THE COMSAT ANGELS

When I first heard about the assignment, in the summer of 1968, I did my best to turn it down. Charles Whitehead, producer of BBC TV's science programme *Horizon*, asked me to fly over to France with him and record a press conference being held by a fourteen-year-old child prodigy, Georges Duval, who was attracting attention in the Paris newspapers. The film would form part of *Horizon*'s new series, which I was scripting, 'The Expanding Mind', about the role of communications satellites and data-processing devices in the so-called information explosion. What annoyed me was this insertion of irrelevant and sensational material into an otherwise serious programme.

'Charles, you'll destroy the whole thing,' I protested across his desk that morning. 'These child prodigies are all the same. Either they simply have some freak talent or they're being manipulated by ambitious parents. Do you honestly believe this boy is a genius?'

'He *might* be, James. Who can say?' Charles waved a plump hand at the contact prints of orbiting satellites pinned to the walls. 'We're doing a programme about advanced communications systems – if they have any justification at all, it's that they bring rare talents like this one to light.'

'Rubbish – these prodigies have been exposed time and again. They bear the same relation to true genius that a cross-channel swimmer does to a lunar astronaut.'

In the end, despite my protests, Charles won me over, but I was still sceptical when we flew to Orly Airport the next morning. Every two or three years there were reports of some newly discovered child genius. The pattern was always the same: the prodigy had mastered chess at the age of three, Sanskrit and calculus at six, Einstein's General Theory of Relativity at twelve. The universities and conservatories of America and Europe opened their doors.

For some reason, though, nothing ever came of these precocious talents. Once the parents, or an unscrupulous commercial sponsor, had squeezed the last drop of publicity out of the child, his so-called genius seemed to evaporate and he vanished into oblivion.

'Do you remember Minou Drouet?' I asked Charles as we drove from Orly. 'A child prodigy of a few years back. Cocteau read her poems and said, "Every child is a genius *except* Minou Drouet."'

'James, relax . . . Like all scientists, you can't bear anything that challenges your own prejudices. Let's wait until we see him. He might surprise us.'

He certainly did, though not as we expected.

Georges Duval lived with his widowed mother in the small town of Montereau, on the Seine thirty miles south of Paris. As we drove across the cobbled square past the faded police prefecture, it seemed an unlikely birthplace for another Darwin, Freud or Curie. However, the Duvals' house was an expensively built white-walled villa overlooking a placid arm of the river. A well-tended lawn ran down to a vista of swans and water-meadows.

Parked in the drive was the location truck of the film unit we had hired, and next to it a radio van from Radio-Television-Française and a Mercedes with a *Paris-Match* sticker across the rear window. Sound cables ran across the gravel into a kitchen window. A sharp-faced maid led us without ado towards the press conference. In the lounge, four rows of gilt chairs brought in from the Hôtel de Ville faced a mahogany table by the windows. Here a dozen cameramen were photographing Madame Duval, a handsome woman of thirty-five with calm grey eyes, arms circumspectly folded below two strands of pearls. A trio of solemn-faced men in formal suits protected her from the technicians setting up microphones and trailing their cables under the table.

Already, fifteen minutes before Georges Duval appeared, I felt there was something bogus about the atmosphere. The three dark-suited men – the Director of Studies at the Sorbonne, a senior bureaucrat from the French Ministry of Education, and a representative of the Institut Pascal, a centre of advanced study – gave the conference an overstuffed air only slightly eased by the presence of the local mayor, a homely figure in a shiny suit, and the boy's schoolmaster, a lantern-jawed man hunched around his pipe.

Needless to say, when Georges Duval arrived, he was a total disappointment. Accompanied by a young priest, the family counsellor, he took his seat behind the table, bowing to the three officials and giving his mother a dutiful buss on the cheek. As the lights came on and the cameras began to turn, his eyes stared down at us without embarrassment.

Georges Duval was then fourteen, a slim-shouldered boy small for his age, self-composed in a grey flannel suit. His face was pale and anaemic, hair plastered down to hide his huge bony forehead. He kept his hands in his pockets, concealing his over-large wrists. What struck me immediately was the lack of any emotion or expression on his face, as if he had left his mind in the next room, hard at work on some intricate problem.

Professor Leroux of the Sorbonne opened the press conference. Georges had first come to light when he had taken his mathematics degree at thirteen, the youngest since Descartes. Leroux described Georges's career: reading at the age of two, by nine he had passed his full matriculation

exam – usually taken at fifteen or sixteen. As a vacation hobby he had mastered English and German, by eleven had passed the diploma of the Paris Conservatoire in music theory, by twelve was working for his degree. He had shown a precocious interest in molecular biology, and already corresponded with biochemists at Harvard and Cambridge.

While this familiar catalogue was being unfolded, Georges's eyes, below that large carapace of a skull, showed not a glimmer of emotion. Now and then he glanced at a balding young man in a soft grey suit sitting by himself in the front row. At the time I thought he was Georges's elder brother – he had the same high bony temples and closed face. Later, however, I discovered that he had a very different role.

Questions were invited for Georges. These followed the usual pattern – what did he think of Vietnam, the space-race, the psychedelic scene, miniskirts, girls, Brigitte Bardot? In short, not a question of a serious nature. Georges answered in good humour, stating that outside his studies he had no worthwhile opinions. His voice was firm and reasonably modest, but he looked more and more bored by the conference, and as soon as it broke up, he joined the young man in the front row. Together they left the room, the same abstracted look on their faces that one sees in the insane, as if crossing our own universe at a slight angle.

While we made our way out, I talked to the other journalists. Georges's father had been an assembly worker at the Renault plant in Paris; neither he nor Madame Duval was in the least educated, and the house, into which the widow and son had moved only two months earlier, was paid for by a large research foundation. Evidently there were unseen powers standing guard over Georges Duval. He apparently never played with the boys from the town.

As we drove away, Charles Whitehead said slyly: 'I notice you didn't ask any questions yourself.'

'The whole thing was a complete set-up. We might as well have been interviewing De Gaulle.'

'Perhaps we were.'

'You think the General may be behind all this?'

'It's possible. Let's face it, if the boy *is* outstanding, it makes it more difficult for him to go off and work for Du Pont or IBM.'

'But is he? He was intelligent, of course, but all the same, I'll bet you that three years from now no one will even remember him.'

After we returned to London my curiosity came back a little. In the Air France bus to the TV Centre at White City I scanned the children on the pavement. Without a doubt none of them had the maturity and intelligence of Georges Duval. Two mornings later, when I found myself still thinking about Georges, I went up to the research library.

As I turned through the clippings, going back twenty years, I made an interesting discovery. Starting in 1948, I found that a major news story about a child prodigy came up once every two years. The last celebrity

had been Bobby Silverberg, a fifteen-year-old from Tampa, Florida. The photographs in the *Look*, *Paris-Match* and *Oggi* profiles might have been taken of Georges Duval. Apart from the American setting, every ingredient was the same: the press conference, TV cameras, presiding officials, the high-school principal, doting mother – and the young genius himself, this time with a crew-cut and nothing to hide that high bony skull. There were two college degrees already passed, postgraduate fellowships offered by MIT, Princeton and CalTech.

And then what?

'That was nearly three years ago,' I said to Judy Walsh, my secretary. 'What's he doing now?'

She flicked through the index cards, then shook her head. 'Nothing. I suppose he's taking another degree at a university somewhere.'

'He's already got two degrees. By now he should have come up with a faster-than-light drive or a method of synthesizing life.'

'He's only seventeen. Wait until he's a little older.'

'Older? You've given me an idea. Let's go back to the beginning – 1948.'

Judy handed me the bundle of clippings. *Life* magazine had picked up the story of Gunther Bergman, the first post-war prodigy, a seventeen-year-old Swedish youth whose pale, over-large eyes stared out from the photographs. An unusual feature was the presence at the graduation ceremony at Uppsala University of three representatives from the Nobel Foundation. Perhaps because he was older than Silverberg and Georges Duval, his intellectual achievements seemed prodigious. The degree he was collecting was his third; already he had done original research in radio-astronomy, helping to identify the unusual radio-sources that a decade later were termed 'quasars'.

'A spectacular career in astronomy seems guaranteed. It should be easy to track him down. He'll be, what?, thirty-seven now, professor at least, well on his way to a Nobel Prize.'

We searched through the professional directories, telephoned Greenwich Observatory and the London Secretariat of the World Astronomical Federation.

No one had heard of Gunther Bergman.

'Right, where is he?' I asked Judy when we had exhausted all lines of inquiry. 'For heaven's sake, it's twenty years; he should be world-famous by now.'

'Perhaps he's dead.'

'That's possible.' I gazed down pensively at Judy's quizzical face. 'Put in a call to the Nobel Foundation. In fact, clear your desk and get all the international directories we can up here. We're going to make the Comsats sing.'

Three weeks later, when I carried my bulky briefcase into Charles Whitehead's office, there was an electric spring in my step.

Charles eyed me warily over his glasses. 'James, I hear you've been hard on the trail of our missing geniuses. What have you got?'

'A new programme.'

'New? We've already got Georges Duval listed in *Radio Times.*'

'For how long?' I pulled a chair up to his desk and opened my briefcase, then spread the dozen files in front of him. 'Let me put you in the picture. Judy and I have been back to 1948. In those twenty years there have been eleven cases of so-called geniuses. Georges Duval is the twelfth.'

I placed the list in front of him.

1948 Gunther Bergman (Uppsala, Sweden)
1950 Jaako Litmanen (Vaasa, Finland)
1952 John Warrender (Kansas City, USA)
1953 Arturo Bandini (Bologna, Italy)
1955 Gesai Ray (Calcutta, India)
1957 Giuliano Caldare (Palermo, Sicily)
1958 Wolfgang Herter (Cologne, Germany)
1960 Martin Sherrington (Canterbury, England)
1962 Josef Oblensky (Leningrad, USSR)
1964 Yen Hsi Shan (Wuhan, China)
1965 Robert Silverberg (Tampa, USA)
1968 Georges Duval (Montereau, France)

Charles studied the list, now and then patting his forehead with a floral handkerchief. 'Frankly, apart from Georges Duval, the names mean absolutely nothing.'

'Isn't that strange? There's enough talent there to win all the Nobel Prizes three times over.'

'Have you tried to trace them?'

I let out a cry of pain. Even the placid Judy gave a despairing shudder. 'Have we tried? My God, we've done nothing else. Charles, apart from checking a hundred directories and registers, we've contacted the original magazines and news agencies, checked with the universities that originally offered them scholarships, talked on the overseas lines to the BBC reporters in New York, Delhi and Moscow.'

'And? What do they know about them?'

'Nothing. A complete blank.'

Charles shook his head doggedly. 'They must be somewhere. What about the universities they were supposed to go to?'

'Nothing there, either. It's a curious thing, but not one of them actually went on to a university. We've contacted the senates of nearly fifty universities. Not a mention of them. They took external degrees while still at school, but after that they severed all connections with the academic world.'

Charles sat forward over the list, holding it like a portion of some treasure map. 'James, it looks as if you're going to win your bet. Somehow

they all petered out in late adolescence. A sudden flaring of intelligence backed by prodigious memory, not matched by any real creative spark . . . that's it, I suppose – none of them was a genius.'

'As a matter of fact, I think they all were.' Before he could stop me I went on. 'Forget that for the moment. Whether or not they had genius is irrelevant. Certainly they had intellects vastly beyond the average, IQs of two hundred, enormous scholastic talents in a wide range of subjects. They had a sudden burst of fame and exposure and –'

'They vanished into thin air. What are you suggesting – some kind of conspiracy?'

'In a sense, yes.'

Charles handed me the list. 'Come off it. Do you really mean that a sinister government bureau has smuggled them off, they're slaving away now on some super-weapon?'

'It's possible, but I doubt it.' I took a packet of photographs from the second folder. 'Have a look at them.'

Charles picked up the first. 'Ah, there's Georges. He looks older here, those TV cameras are certainly ageing.'

'It's not Georges Duval. It's Oblensky, the Russian boy, taken six years ago. Quite a resemblance, though.' I spread the twelve photographs on the table top. Charles moved along the half-circle, comparing the over-large eyes and bony foreheads, the same steady gaze.

'Wait a minute! Are you sure this isn't Duval?' Charles picked up Oblensky's photograph and pointed to the figure of a young man in a light grey suit standing behind some mayoral official in a Leningrad parlour. '*He* was at Duval's press conference, sitting right in front of us.'

I nodded to Judy. 'You're right, Charles. And he's not only in that photo.' I pulled together the photographs of Bobby Silverberg, Herter and Martin Sherrington. In each one the same balding figure in the dove-grey suit was somewhere in the background, his over-sharp eyes avoiding the camera lens. 'No university admits to knowing him, nor do Shell, Philips, General Motors or a dozen other big international companies. Of course, there are other organizations he might be a talent scout for . . .'

Charles had stood up, and was slowly walking around his desk. 'Such as the CIA – you think he may be recruiting talent for some top-secret Government think-thank? It's unlikely, but –'

'What about the Russians?' I cut in. 'Or the Chinese? Let's face it, eleven young men have vanished into thin air. What happened to them?'

Charles stared down at the photographs. 'The strange thing is that I vaguely recognize all these faces. Those bony skulls, and those eyes . . . somewhere. Look, James, we may have the makings of a new programme here. This English prodigy, Martin Sherrington, he should be easy to track down. Then the German, Herter. Find them and we may be on to something.'

* * *

We set off for Canterbury the next morning. The address, which I had been given by a friend who was science editor of the *Daily Express*, was on a housing estate behind the big General Electric radio and television plant on the edge of the city. We drove past the lines of grey-brick houses until we found the Sherringtons' at the end of a row. Rising out of the remains of a greenhouse was a huge ham operator's radio mast, its stay-wires snapped and rusting. In the eight years since his tremendous mind had revealed itself to the local grammar-school master, Martin Sherrington might have gone off to the ends of the world, to Cape Kennedy, the Urals or Peking.

In fact, not only were neither Martin nor his parents there, but it took us all of two days to find anyone who even remembered them at all. The present tenants of the house, a frayed-looking couple, had been there two years; and before them a large family of criminal inclinations who had been forced out by bailiffs and police. The headmaster of the grammar-school had retired to Scotland. Fortunately the school matron remembered Martin – 'a brilliantly clever boy, we were all very proud of him. To tell the truth, though, I can't say we felt much affection for him; he didn't invite it.' She knew nothing of Mrs Sherrington, and as for the boy's father, they assumed he had died in the war.

Finally, thanks to a cashier at the accounts office of the local electric company, we found where Mrs Sherrington had moved.

As soon as I saw that pleasant white-walled villa in its prosperous suburb on the other side of Canterbury, I felt that the trail was warming. Something about the crisp gravel and large, well-trimmed garden reminded me of another house – Georges Duval's near Paris.

From the roof of my car parked next to the hedge we watched a handsome, strong-shouldered woman strolling in the rose garden.

'She's come up in the world,' I commented. 'Who pays for this pad?'

The meeting was curious. This rather homely, quietly dressed woman in her late thirties gazed at us across the silver tea-set like a tamed Mona Lisa. She told us that we had absolutely no chance of interviewing Martin on television.

'So much interest in your son was roused at the time, Mrs Sherrington. Can you tell us about his subsequent academic career? Which university did he go to?'

'His education was completed privately.' As for his present whereabouts, she believed he was now abroad, working for a large international organization whose name she was not at liberty to divulge.

'Not a government department, Mrs Sherrington?'

She hesitated, but only briefly. 'I am told the organization is intimately connected with various governments, but I have no real knowledge.'

Her voice was over-precise, as if she were hiding her real accent. As we left, I realized how lonely her life was; but as Judy remarked, she had probably been lonely ever since Martin Sherrington had first learned to speak.

* * *

Our trip to Germany was equally futile. All traces of Wolfgang Herter had vanished from the map. A few people in the small village near the Frankfurt autobahn remembered him, and the village postman said that Frau Herter had moved to Switzerland, to a lakeside villa near Lucerne. A woman of modest means and education, but the son had no doubt done very well.

I asked one or two questions.

Wolfgang's father? Frau Herter had arrived with the child just after the war; the husband had probably perished in one of the nameless prison-camps or battlegrounds of World War II.

The balding man in the light grey suit? Yes, he had definitely come to the village, helping Frau Herter arrange her departure.

'Back to London,' I said to Judy. 'This needs bigger resources than you and I have.'

As we flew back Judy said: 'One thing I don't understand. Why have the fathers always disappeared?'

'A good question. Putting it crudely, love, a unique genetic coupling produced these twelve boys. It almost looks as if someone has torn the treasure map in two and kept one half. Think of the stock bank they're building up, enough sperm on ice in a eugenic cocktail to repopulate the entire planet.'

This nightmare prospect was on my mind when I walked into Charles Whitehead's office the next morning. It was the first time I had seen Charles in his shirtsleeves. To my surprise, he brushed aside my apologies, then beckoned me to the huge spread of photographs pinned to the plaster wall behind his desk. The office was a clutter of newspaper cuttings and blown-up newsreel stills. Charles was holding a magnifying glass over a photograph of President Johnson and McNamara at a White House reception.

'While you were gone we've been carrying out our own search,' he said. 'If it's any consolation, we couldn't trace any of them at first.'

'Then you have found them? Where?'

'Here.' He gestured at the dozens of photographs. 'Right in front of our noses. We're looking at them every day.'

He pointed to a news agency photograph of a Kremlin reception for Premier Ulbricht of East Germany. Kosygin and Brezhnev were there, Soviet President Podgorny talking to the Finnish Ambassador, and a crowd of twenty party functionaries.

'Recognize anyone? Apart from Kosygin and company?'

'The usual bunch of hatchet-faced waiters these people like to surround themselves with. Wait a minute, though.'

Charles's finger had paused over a quiet-faced young man with a high dolichocephalic head, standing at Kosygin's elbow. Curiously, the Soviet Premier's face was turned towards him rather than to Brezhnev.

'Oblensky – the Russian prodigy. What's he doing with Kosygin? He looks like an interpreter.'

'Between Kosygin and Brezhnev? Hardly. I've checked with the BBC and Reuters correspondents in Moscow. They've seen him around quite a bit. He never says anything in public, but the important men always talk to *him*.'

I put down the photograph. 'Charles, get on to the Foreign Office and the US Embassy. It makes sense – all eleven of them are probably there, in the Soviet Union.'

'Relax. That's what we thought. But have a look at these.'

The next picture had been taken at a White House meeting between Johnson, McNamara and General Westmoreland discussing US policy in Vietnam. There were the usual aides, secretaries and Secret Service men out on the lawn. One face had been ringed, that of a man in his early thirties standing unobtrusively behind Johnson and Westmoreland.

'Warrender – the 1952 genius! *He's* working for the US Government.'

'More surprises.' Charles guided me around the rest of the photographs. 'You might be interested in these.'

The next showed Pope Paul on the balcony of St Peter's, making his annual 'Urbis et Orbis' – the city and the world – benediction to the huge crowd in the square. Standing beside him were Cardinal Mancini, chief of the Papal Secretariat, and members of his household staff. Obliquely behind the Pope was a man of about thirty wearing what I guessed to be a Jesuit's soutane, large eyes watching Paul with a steady gaze.

'Bandini, Arturo Bandini,' I commented, recognizing the face. '*Oggi* did a series of features on him. He's moved high in the papal hierarchy.'

'There are few closer to Il Papa, or better loved.'

After that came a photograph of U Thant, taken at a UN Security Council meeting during the Cuban missile crisis. Sitting behind the Secretary General was a pale-skinned young Brahmin with a fine mouth and eyes – Gesai Ray, the high-caste Indian who was the only well-born prodigy I had come across.

'Ray is now even higher up on U Thant's staff,' Charles added. 'There's one interesting photograph of him and Warrender together during the Cuban crisis. Warrender was then on JFK's staff.' He went on casually: 'The year after Oblensky reached the Kremlin, Khrushchev was sacked.'

'So they're in contact? I'm beginning to realize what the Moscow–Washington hot line is really for.'

Charles handed me another still. 'Here's an old friend of yours – our own Martin Sherrington. He's on Professor Lovell's staff at the Jodrell Bank Radio-Observatory. One of the very few not to go into government or big business.'

'Big science, though.' I stared at the quiet, intense face of the elusive Sherrington, aware that someone at Jodrell Bank had deliberately put me off.

'Like Gunther Bergman – he moved to the United States fifteen years ago from Sweden, is now very high up in the NASA command chain. Yen Hsi Shan is the youngest, barely seventeen, but have a look at this.'

The photograph showed Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai on the reviewing platform in Peking during the cultural revolution, an immense concourse of teenagers passing below, all holding copies of Mao's *Thoughts* and chanting out slogans. Standing between Mao and Chou was a boy with a fist in the air who was the chief Red Guard.

'Yen Hsi Shan. He's started early,' Charles said. 'One or two of the others we haven't been able to trace as yet, though we hear Herter is with the giant Zurich-Hamburg banking trust. Jaako Litmanen, the Finnish prodigy, is rumoured to be working for the Soviet space programme.'

'Well, one has to admit it,' I commented, 'they've certainly all made good.'

'Not all.' Charles showed me the last picture, of the Sicilian genius Giuliano Caldare. 'One of them made bad. Caldare emigrated to the United States in 1960, is now in the inner circle of the Cosa Nostra, a coming talent from all one hears.'

I sat down at Charles's desk. 'Right, but what does this prove? It may look like a conspiracy, but given their talents one would expect them to rise in the world.'

'That's putting it mildly. Good God, this bunch only has to take one step forward and they'll be running the entire show.'

'A valid point.' I opened Charles's note-pad. 'We'll revise the programme – agreed? We start off with the Georges Duval conference, follow up with our own discoveries of where the others are, splice in old newsreel material, interviews with the mothers – it'll make quite a programme.'

Or so we hoped.

Needless to say, the programme was never started. Two days later, when I was still organizing the newsreel material, word came down from the head of features that the project was to be shelved. We tried to argue, but the decision was absolute.

Shortly after, my contract with *Horizon* was ended, and I was given the job of doing a new children's series about great inventors. Charles was shunted to 'International Golf'. Of course, it was obvious to both of us that we had come too close for someone's comfort, but there was little we could do about it. Three months later, I made a trip to Jodrell Bank radio-observatory with a party of scientific journalists and had a glimpse of Martin Sherrington, a tall, finely featured man watching with his hard gaze as Professor Lovell held his press conference.

During the next months I carefully followed the newspapers and TV newscasts. If there was a conspiracy of some kind, what were they planning? Here they were, sitting behind the world's great men, hands ready to take the levers of power. But a global dictatorship sounded unlikely. Two of them at least seemed opposed to established authority. Apart from Caldare in the Cosa Nostra, Georges Duval put his musical talents to spectacular use, becoming within less than a year the greatest of the French 'Ye-Ye' singers, eclipsing the Beatles as a leader of the

psychedelic youth generation. In the forefront of the world protest movement, he was hated by the police of a dozen countries but idolized by teenagers from Bangkok to Mexico City.

Any collaboration between Georges and Bandini at the Vatican seemed improbable. Besides, nothing that happened in the world at large suggested that members of the group were acting in anything but a benign role: the nuclear confrontation averted during the Cuban missile crisis, the fall of Khrushchev and the Russo-American détente, peace moves in Vietnam, the Vatican's liberalized policy towards birth-control and divorce. Even the Red Guard movement and the chaos it brought could be seen as a subtle means of deflecting Chinese militancy at a time when she might have intervened in Vietnam.

Then, three months later, Charles Whitehead telephoned me.

'There's a report in *Der Spiegel*,' he told me with studied casualness. 'I thought you might be interested. Another young genius has been discovered.'

'Great,' I said. 'We'll do a programme about it. The usual story, I take it?'

'Absolutely. That same forehead and eyes, the mother who lost her husband years ago, our friend in the villa business. This boy looks really bright, though. An IQ estimated at 300. What a mind.'

'I read the script. The only trouble is, I never got to see the programme. Where is this, by the way?'

'Hebron.'

'Where's that?'

'Near Jerusalem. In Israel.'

'Israel?'

I put the phone down. Somewhere in my mind a tumbler had clicked. Israel! Of course, at last everything made sense. The twelve young men, now occupying positions of power, controlling everything from the US, Russian and Chinese governments to satellite policy, international finance, the UN, big science, the youth and protest movement. There was even a Judas, Giuliano Caldare of the Cosa Nostra. It was obvious now. I had always assumed that the twelve were working for some mysterious organization, but in fact they *were* the organization. They were waiting for the moment of arrival. When the child came, he would be prepared for in the right way, watched over by the Comsat relays, hot lines open, the armies of the world immobilized. This time there would be no mistakes.

After an hour I rang Charles back.

'Charles,' I began, 'I know what's happening. Israel . . .'

'What are you talking about?'

'Israel. Don't you see, Hebron is near Bethlehem.'

There was an exasperated silence. 'James, for heaven's sake . . . You're not suggesting that –'

'Of course. The twelve young men, what else could they be preparing

for? And why did the Arab-Israeli war end in only two days? How old is this boy?'

'Thirteen.'

'Let's say another ten years. Good, I had a feeling he would come.'

When Charles protested I handed the receiver to Judy.

As a matter of fact, I am quite certain that I am right. I have seen the photographs of Joshua Herzl taken at his press conference, a slightly difficult lad who rubbed quite a few of the reporters the wrong way. He vanished off the scene shortly afterwards, though no doubt his mother now has a pleasant white-walled villa outside Haifa or Tel Aviv.

And Jodrell Bank is building an enormous new radio-telescope. One day soon we shall be seeing signs in the skies.

1968

THE KILLING GROUND

As the last smoke from the burning personnel carrier rose through the wet dawn air, Major Pearson could see the silver back of the river three hundred yards from his command post on the hill. Pulverized by the artillery fire, the banks of the channel had collapsed into a network of craters. Water leaked across the meadow, stained by the diesel oil from the fuel tanks of the carrier. Working the binoculars with his thin hands, Pearson studied the trees along the opposite bank. The river was little wider than a stream, and no more than waist-deep, but the fields on both sides were as open as billiard tables. Already the American helicopters had climbed from their bases around the city, clattering in packs over the valley like mindless birds.

An explosion in the driving cabin of the personnel carrier kicked out the doors and windshield. The light flared across the water-soaked meadow, for a moment isolating the faded letters on the memorial stone that formed the rear wall of the command post. Pearson watched the nearest flight of helicopters. They were circling the motor-bridge a mile down-river, too far away to notice the wrecked vehicle and its perimeter of corpses. The ambush, though successful, had not been planned. The carrier had blindly driven up the embankment road as Pearson's unit was preparing to cross the river.

With any luck, Pearson hoped, the crossing would now be called off and they would be ordered to withdraw into the hills. He shivered in his ragged uniform. Corporal Benson had pulled the trousers off a dead Marine machine-gunner the previous morning, and there had been no time to wash out the blood caked across the thighs and waist.

Behind the memorial was the sandbagged entrance of the storage tunnel. Here Sergeant Tulloch and the seventeen-year-old lieutenant sent up overnight from the youth cadre were working on the field radio, rewiring the headphones and battery. Around the emplacement Pearson's thirty men sat over their weapons, ammunition boxes and telephone wire piled around their feet. Exhausted by the ambush, they would have little energy left for a river crossing.

'Sergeant . . . Sergeant Tulloch!' Pearson called out, deliberately coarsening his over-precise schoolmaster's voice. As he half-expected, Tulloch ignored the shout. A pair of copper terminals clamped in his sharp mouth, he went on splicing the frayed wire. Although Pearson was in command of the

guerilla unit, its real initiative came from the Scotsman. A regular in the Gordon Highlanders before the American landings six years earlier, the sergeant had joined the first rebel bands that formed the nucleus of the National Liberation Army. As Tulloch himself openly boasted, he had been drawn to the insurgent army chiefly by the prospect of killing the English. Pearson often wondered how far the sergeant still identified him with the puppet regime in London propped up by the American occupation forces.

As he climbed out of the slit trench gunfire flickered from the central traverse of the motor-bridge. Pearson waited behind the plinth of the memorial. He listened to the roar of heavy howitzers firing from the American enclave five miles to the west. Here nine hundred Marine artillerymen had been holding out for months against two divisions of rebel troops. Supported from the air by helicopter drops, the Americans fought on from their deep bunkers, firing thousands of rounds a day from their seventy guns. The meadows around the enclave formed the landscape of a drowned moon.

The shell whined away through the damp air, the explosions lifting the broken soil. Between the impacts came the rattle of small-arms fire as the attack went in across the bridge. Slinging his Sten gun over his narrow shoulders, Pearson ran back to the tunnel.

'What's holding us up, Sergeant? This radio should have been checked at Battalion.'

He reached out to the mud-splattered console, but Tulloch pushed his hand away with the spanner. Ignoring the young lieutenant's self-conscious salute, Tulloch snapped: 'I'll have it ready in time, Major. Or are you wanting to withdraw now?'

Avoiding the lieutenant's eyes, Pearson said: 'We'll follow orders, Sergeant, when and if you repair this set.'

'I'll repair it, Major. Don't worry yourself about that.'

Pearson unfastened the chin-strap of his helmet. During their three months together the sergeant had clearly decided that Pearson had lost heart. Of course Tulloch was right. Pearson looked around the fortified position shielded from the air by the ragged willows, counting the pinched faces of the men huddled beside the field stove. Dressed in ragged uniforms held together with American webbing, living for months in holes in the ground, under-fed and under-armed, what kept them going? Not hatred of the Americans, few of whom, apart from the dead, they had ever seen. Secure within their bases, and protected by an immense technology of warfare, the American expeditionary forces were as remote as some archangelic legion on the day of Armageddon.

If anything, it was fortunate that the Americans were spread so thinly on the ground, or the entire liberation front would long since have been wiped out. Even with twenty million men under arms, the Americans could spare fewer than 200,000 soldiers for the British Isles, a remote backwater in their global war against dozens of national liberation armies.

The underground free radio system which Pearson and Tulloch listened to at night as they huddled in their tunnels below the searching helicopters reported continuous fighting from the Pyrenees to the Bavarian Alps, the Caucasus to Karachi. Thirty years after the original conflict in south-east Asia, the globe was now a huge insurrectionary torch, a world Vietnam.

'Benson!' The corporal limped over, his captured carbine heavy in his thin arms. Pearson waved with a show of temper at the men slumped against the sandbags. 'Corporal, in half an hour we're going into an attack! At least keep them awake!'

With a tired salute, the corporal went off round the emplacement, half-heartedly nudging the men with his boot. Pearson stared through the trees at the river line. To the north, near the ruined castle at Windsor, columns of smoke rose below the helicopters as they plunged and dived, firing their rockets into the ragged forests that had grown among the empty surburban streets. In this immense plain of violence only the meadow below with its leaking river seemed quiet. The water ebbed around the personnel carrier, stirring the legs of the corpses. Without thinking, Pearson started to count his men again. They would have to run across the open ground, ford the river and penetrate the line of trees on the opposite bank. Perhaps the Americans were sitting there with their rapid-fire Gatlings, waiting for them to break cover.

'. . . Major Pearson.' The lieutenant touched his elbow. 'You wanted to see the prisoners.'

'Right. We'll have another go at them.' Pearson followed the boy around the memorial. The presence of this young man – barely older than his pupils at the mountain school in the north of Scotland – gave Pearson some kind of encouragement. Already his age had begun to tell doubly against him. Over the years the losses in manpower had been so great, a million soldiers and a further million civilians dead, that older men were put in the more dangerous roles, saving the young for whatever peace would one day come.

The three Americans were behind the memorial, guarded by a soldier with a Bren gun. Lying on his back was a Negro sergeant who had been shot through the chest. His arms and shoulders were caked with blood, and he breathed unevenly through the thick crust on his mouth and chin. Leaning against him was a young private hunched over the knapsack on his knees. His tired student's eyes stared down at his manacled wrists, as if unable to grasp the fact of his own capture.

The third prisoner was a captain, the only officer in the ambushed patrol, a slimly built man with grey crew-cut hair and a soft but intelligent face. In spite of his uniform and webbing he looked less like a combat soldier than a war correspondent or observer. Telephone wire was lashed around his wrists, forcing him to hold his elbows together. Nevertheless he was watching closely the preparations for the coming attack. Pearson could see him counting the men and weapons, the two machine-guns and ammunition boxes.

As these sharp blue eyes turned to examine Pearson, running over his decrepit uniform and equipment, Pearson felt a surge of resentment at these intelligent and self-confident men who had occupied the world with their huge expeditionary armies. The American was looking at him with that same surprise Pearson had seen on prisoners' faces before, a genuine amazement that these ragged little men could go on fighting for so long. Even the term the Americans used to describe the rebel soldiers, 'Charlie', inherited from the first Vietnam, showed their contempt, whether the soldier fighting against them was a Riff tribesman, Catalan farmer or Japanese industrial worker.

However, as the American knew all too well, if the order came through to attack, the three of them would be shot down where they sat.

Pearson knelt by the Negro sergeant. With the barrel of his Sten gun he nudged the young soldier clutching his knapsack. 'Can't you do anything for him? Where's your morphine?'

The soldier looked up at Pearson, and then let his head drop, staring at the fuel oil that formed rainbows on his boots. Pearson raised his hand, about to hit him with the back of his fist. Then the sounds of gunfire on the motor-bridge were lost in the overhead whoom of a shell. Coming across the river, the heavy 120 mm soared over the meadow and plunged into the woods below the hill-crest. Pearson crouched behind the memorial, hoping the shell was a stray. Then Sergeant Tulloch signalled that two more had started on their way. The next fell without exploding into the water-meadow. The third landed fifty feet below the memorial, spattering its surface with broken earth.

When it was quiet again Pearson waited as Corporal Benson pulled the knapsack away from the young soldier and emptied its contents. He slit the captain's pockets with his bayonet and jerked off his ID tag.

There was little to be gained from any formal interrogation. American weapons technology had advanced to the point where it made almost no sense at all to the rebel commanders. Artillery fire, battle dispositions and helicopter raids were now computer-directed, patrols and sorties programmed ahead. The American equipment was so sophisticated that even the wristwatches stripped off dead prisoners were too complicated to read.

Pearson reached down to the clutter of coins and keys beside the private. He opened a leather-bound diary. Inside was a series of illegible entries, and a folded letter from a friend, evidently a draft-dodger, about the anti-war movement at home. Pearson tossed them into the pool of water leaking below the plinth of the memorial. He picked up an oil-stained book, one of a paperback educational series, Charles Olsen's *Call Me Ishmael.*

As he held the book in his hands, Pearson glanced back to where Sergeant Tulloch stood over the field radio, well aware that the sergeant would disapprove of this unfading strand of literacy in his own character. He wiped the oil off the American eagle. What an army, whose privates

were no longer encouraged to carry field-marshals' batons in their knapsacks but books like this.

To the captain he said: 'The US Army must be the most literate since Xenophon's.' Pearson slipped the book into his pocket. The captain was looking down over his shoulder at the river. 'Do you know where we are?' Pearson asked him.

The captain turned himself round, trying to ease the wounds on his wrists. He looked up at Pearson with his sharp eyes. 'I guess so. Runnymede, on the Thames River.'

Surprised, Pearson said ungrudgingly: 'You're better informed than my own men. I used to live about ten miles from here. Near one of the pacified villages.'

'Maybe you'll go back one day.'

'I dare say, Captain. And maybe we'll sign a new Magna Carta into the bargain. How long have you been out here?'

The captain hesitated, sizing up Pearson's interest. 'Just over a month.'

'And you're in combat already? I thought you had a three-month acclimatization period. You must be as badly off as we are.'

'I'm not a combat soldier, Major. I'm an architect, with US Army Graves Commission. Looking after memorials all over the world.'

'That's quite a job. The way things are going, it has almost unlimited prospects.'

'I hate to have to agree with you, Major.' The American's manner had become noticeably more ingratiating, but Pearson was too preoccupied to care. 'Believe me, a lot of us back home feel the war's achieved absolutely nothing.'

'Nothing . . . ?' Pearson repeated. 'It's achieved everything.' An armoured helicopter soared across the hill-crest, its heavy fans beating at the foliage over their heads. For one thing, the war had turned the entire population of Europe into an armed peasantry, the first intelligent agrarian community since the eighteenth century. *That* peasantry had produced the Industrial Revolution. This one, literally burrowing like some advanced species of termite into the sub-soil of the twentieth century, might in time produce something greater. Fortunately, the Americans were protected from any hope of success by their own good intentions, their refusal, whatever the cost in their own casualties, to use nuclear weapons.

Two tanks had moved on to the parapet of the bridge, firing their machine-guns along the roadway. A scout helicopter shot down into the fields across the river was burning fiercely, the flames twisting the metal blades.

'Major!' Corporal Benson ran to the tunnel mouth. Tulloch was crouched over the radio, headphones on, beckoning towards Pearson. 'They're through to Command, sir.'

Ten minutes later, when Pearson passed the memorial on his way to the forward post, the American captain had managed to lift himself on to his knees. Wrists clamped together in front of his chest, he looked as

if he were praying at some ruined wayside shrine. The wounded Negro had opened his eyes, shallow breaths breaking through the caked blood on his lips. The young private slept against the plinth of the memorial.

The captain pointed with his wired hands at the men strapping up their packs. Pearson ignored him, and was about to move on. Then something about the American's posture, and their shared community of fatigue and hopelessness, made him stop.

'We're going forward.'

Eyes half-closing, the American stared down at his wrists, as if aware of the effort he had wasted in trying to prevent the abrasions from opening. 'That's bad luck. Not my day.' His face grew stiff and wooden as the blood emptied from his cheeks.

Pearson watched Sergeant Tulloch supervise the stowage of the radio and begin his rounds of the men, waiting with weapons at the ready. 'Why did you come up the river?'

The captain tapped the memorial stone with his wrists. 'We wanted to see about moving this. The Kennedy Memorial.'

'Kennedy . . . ?' Pearson turned and stared down at the broken lettering on the stone. Vaguely he remembered the memorial built by a previous British government at Runnymede to commemorate the assassinated President. In an amiable, if sentimental, gesture an acre of English ground had been given to the American people overlooking Magna Carta island. The President's widow had been present at the unveiling.

The American was feeling the broken lettering. He pulled off his cap and dipped it in the pool of oil-stained water beside the plinth. He began to work away at the memorial, scraping off the mud, as Pearson moved down through the trees to the forward post.

When Pearson returned shortly afterwards the American was still working away at the memorial with his wired hands. Below the surface dirt were the residues of earlier defacements, slogans marked in engine grease or cut with bayonets. There was even one, 'Stop US Atrocities in Vietnam', almost as old as the monument itself. Pearson remembered that the memorial had been regularly defaced since its unveiling, a favourite target of vandals and agitators.

'Major, we're ready to move off, sir.' Tulloch saluted him smartly, for the first time that day. The American was still scraping at the stone, and had managed to clean at least half of the front surface.

The lead platoon moved down the slope. As the captain dropped his cap and sat down, Pearson signalled to Sergeant Tulloch.

'Okay, Charlie – off your backside!' Tulloch had drawn his .45 automatic. The rear platoon was filing past, the men's eyes fixed on the gaps in the trees, none of them paying any attention to the prisoners.

The American stood up, his eyes almost closed. He joined the two prisoners lying behind the memorial. As he began to sit down again Tulloch stepped behind him and shot him through the head. The

American fell on to the sleeping private. Tulloch straddled his body with one leg. Like a farmer expertly shearing a sheep he shot the other two men, holding them as they struggled. They lay together at the base of the memorial, their legs streaming with blood.

Above them, the drying stone was turning a pale grey in the weak sunlight.

It was almost white twenty minutes later when they began their advance across the meadow. Fifty yards from the bank a murderous fire had greeted them from the Americans concealed among the trees along the opposite shore. Pearson saw Tulloch shot down into the waterlogged grass. He shouted to Corporal Benson to take cover. As he lay in a shallow crater the white rectangle of the memorial was visible through the trees behind him, clear now as it would not have been that morning. In his last moments he wondered if the cleaning of the memorial had been a signal, which the watching Americans had rightly interpreted, and if the captain had deliberately taken advantage of him.

Mortar shells fell in the damp grass around him. Pearson stood up, beckoning to the young lieutenant to follow him, and ran forward to the wreck of the personnel carrier. Ten steps later he was shot down into the oil-stained water.

1969

A PLACE AND A TIME TO DIE

Shotguns levelled, the two men waited on the river bank. From the shore facing them, four hundred yards across the bright spring water, the beating of gongs and drums sounded through the empty air, echoing off the metal roofs of the abandoned town. Fire-crackers burst over the trees along the shore, the mushy pink explosions lighting up the gun-barrels of tanks and armoured cars.

All morning the ill-matched couple making this last stand together – Mannock, the retired and now slightly eccentric police chief, and his reluctant deputy, Forbis, a thyroidal used-car salesman – had watched the mounting activity on the opposite shore. Soon after eight o'clock when Mannock drove through the deserted town, the first arrivals had already appeared on the scene. Four scout-cars carrying a platoon of soldiers in padded brown uniforms were parked on the bank. The officer scanned Mannock through his binoculars for a few seconds and then began to inspect the town. An hour later an advance battalion of field engineers took up their position by the dynamited railway bridge. By noon an entire division had arrived. A dusty caravan of self-propelled guns, tanks on trailers, and mobile field-kitchens in commandeered buses rolled across the farmland and pulled to a halt by the bank. After them came an army of infantry and camp-followers, pulling wooden carts and beating gongs.

Earlier that morning Mannock had climbed the water-tower at his brother's farm. The landscape below the mountains ten miles away was criss-crossed with dozens of motorized columns. Most of them were moving in an apparently random way, half the time blinded by their own dust. Like an advancing horde of ants, they spilled across the abandoned farmland, completely ignoring an intact town and then homing on an empty grain silo.

By now, though, in the early afternoon, all sections of this huge field army had reached the river. Any hopes Mannock had kept alive that they might turn and disappear towards the horizon finally faded. When exactly they would choose to make their crossing was hard to gauge. As he and Forbis watched, a series of enormous camps was being set up. Lines of collapsible huts marked out barrack squares, squads of soldiers marched up and down in the dust, rival groups of civilians – presumably political cadres – drilled and shouted slogans. The smoke from hundreds of mess fires rose into the air, blocking off Mannock's view of the blue-chipped mountains that had formed the backdrop to the river

valley during the twenty years he had spent there. Rows of camouflaged trucks and amphibious vehicles waited along the shore, but there was still no sign of any crossing. Tank-crews wandered about like bored gangs on a boardwalk, letting off fire-crackers and flying paper kites with slogans painted on their tails. Everywhere the beating of gongs and drums went on without pause.

'There must be a million of them there – for God's sake, they'll never get over!' Almost disappointed, Forbis lowered his shotgun on to the sandbag emplacement.

'Nothing's stopped them yet,' Mannock commented. He pointed to a convoy of trucks dragging a flotilla of wooden landing-craft across a crowded parade ground. 'Sampans – they look crazy, don't they?'

While Forbis glared across the river Mannock looked down at him, with difficulty controlling the distaste he felt whenever he realized exactly whom he had chosen as his last companion. A thin, bitter-mouthed man with over-large eyes, Forbis was one of that small group of people Mannock had instinctively disliked throughout his entire life. The past few days in the empty town had confirmed all his prejudices. The previous afternoon, after an hour spent driving around the town and shooting at the stray dogs, Forbis had taken Mannock back to his house. There he had proudly shown off his huge home arsenal. Bored by this display of weapons, Mannock wandered into the dining room, only to find the table laid out like an altar with dozens of far-right magazines, pathological hate-sheets and heaven knew what other nonsense printed on crude home presses.

What had made Forbis stay behind in the deserted town after everyone else had gone? What made him want to defend these few streets where he had never been particularly liked or successful? Some wild gene or strange streak of patriotism – perhaps not all that far removed from his own brand of cantankerousness. Mannock looked across the water as a huge catherine-wheel revolved into the air above a line of tanks parked along the shore, its puffy pink smoke turning the encampment into an enormous carnival. For a moment a surge of hope went through Mannock that this vast army might be driven by wholly peaceful motives, that it might suddenly decide to withdraw, load its tanks on to their trailers and move off to the western horizon.

As the light faded he knew all too well that there was no chance of this happening. Generations of hate and resentment had driven these people in their unbroken advance across the world, and here in this town in a river valley they would take a small part of their revenge.

Why had he himself decided to stay behind, waiting here behind these few useless sandbags with a shotgun in his hands? Mannock glanced back at the water-tower that marked the north-west perimeter of his brother's farm, for years the chief landmark of the town. Until the last moment he had planned to leave with the rest of the family, helping to gas up the cars and turn loose what was left of the livestock. Closing his own house

down for the last time, he decided to wait until the dust subsided when the great exodus began. He drove down to the river, and stood under the broken span of the bridge which the army engineers had dynamited before they retreated.

Walking southwards along the shore, he had nearly been shot by Forbis. The salesman had dug himself into a home-made roadblock above the bank, and was waiting there all alone for his first sight of the enemy. Mannock tried to persuade him to leave with the others, but as he remonstrated with Forbis he realized that he was talking to himself, and why he sounded so unconvincing.

For the next days, as the distant dust-clouds moved towards them from the horizon, turning the small valley into an apocalyptic landscape, the two men formed an uneasy alliance. Forbis looked on impatiently as Mannock moved through the empty streets, closing the doors of the abandoned cars and parking them along the kerb, shutting the windows of the houses and putting lids on the rubbish bins. With his crazy logic Forbis really believed that the two of them could hold up the advance of this immense army.

'Maybe for only a few hours,' he assured Mannock with quiet pride. 'But that'll be enough.'

A few seconds, more likely, Mannock reflected. There would be a brief bloody flurry somewhere; one burst from a machine-pistol and quietus in the dust . . .

'Mannock –!' Forbis pointed to the shore fifty yards from the bridge embankment. A heavy metal skiff was being manhandled into the water by a labour-platoon. A tank backed along the shore behind it, test-rotating its turret. Exhaust belched from its diesel.

'They're coming!' Forbis crouched behind the sandbags, levelling his shotgun. He beckoned furiously at Mannock. 'For God's sake, Mannock, get your head down!'

Mannock ignored him. He stood on the roof of the emplacement, his figure fully exposed. He watched the skiff slide into the water. While two of the crew tried to start the motor, a squad in the bows rowed it across to the first bridge pylon. No other craft were being launched, In fact, as Mannock had noted already, no one was looking across the river at all, though any good marksman could have hit them both without difficulty. A single 75mm shell from one of the tanks would have disposed of them and the emplacement.

'Engineers,' he told Forbis. 'They're checking the bridge supports. Maybe they want to rebuild it first.'

Forbis peered doubtfully through his binoculars, then relaxed his grip on the shotgun. His jaw was still sticking forward aggressively. Watching him, Mannock realized that Forbis genuinely wasn't afraid of what would happen to them. He glanced back at the town. There was a flash of light as an upstairs door turned and caught the sun.

'Where are you going?' A look of suspicion was on Forbis's face,

reinforcing the doubts he already felt about Mannock. 'They may come sooner than you think.'

'They'll come in their own time, not ours,' Mannock said. 'Right now it looks as if even they don't know. I'll be here.'

He walked stiffly towards his car, conscious of the target his black leather jacket made against the white station-wagon. At any moment the bright paintwork could be shattered by a bullet carrying pieces of his heart.

He started the motor and reversed carefully on to the beach. Through the rear-view mirror he watched the opposite shore. The engineers in the skiff had lost interest in the bridge. Like a party of sightseers they drifted along the shore, gazing up at the tank-crews squatting on their turrets. The noise of gongs beat across the water.

In the deserted town the sounds murmured in the metal roofs. Mannock drove round the railway station and the bus depot, checking if any refugees had arrived after crossing the river. Nothing moved. Abandoned cars filled the side-streets. Broken store windows formed jagged frames around piles of detergent packs and soup cans. In the filling stations the slashed pump hoses leaked their last gasolene across the unwashed concrete.

Mannock stopped the car in the centre of the town. He stepped out and looked up at the windows of the hotel and the public library. By some acoustic freak the noise of the gongs had faded, and for a moment it seemed like any drowsy afternoon ten years earlier.

Mannock leaned into the back seat of the car and took out a paper parcel. Fumbling with the dry string, he finally unpicked the ancient knot, then unwrapped the paper and took out a faded uniform jacket.

Searching for a cigarette pack in his hip pockets, Mannock examined the worn braid. He had planned this small gesture – a pointless piece of sentimentality, he well knew – as a private goodbye to himself and the town, but the faded metal badges had about the same relevance to reality as the rusty hubcap lying in the gutter a few feet away. Tossing it over his left arm, he opened the door of the car.

Before he could drop the jacket on to the seat a rifle shot slammed across the square. A volley of echoes boomed off the buildings. Mannock dropped to one knee behind the car, his head lowered from the third-floor windows of the hotel. The bullet had starred the passenger window and richocheted off the dashboard, chipping the steering wheel before exiting through the driver's door.

As the sounds of the explosion faded, Mannock could hear the rubber boots of a slimly built man moving down the fire-escape behind the building. Mannock looked upwards. High above the town a strange flag flew from the mast of the hotel. So the first snipers had moved in across the river. His blood quickening, Mannock drew his shotgun from the seat of the car.

* * *

Some five minutes later he was waiting in the alley behind the supermarket when a running figure darted past him. As the man crashed to the gravel Mannock straddled him with both legs, the shotgun levelled at his face. Mannock looked down, expecting to find a startled yellow-skinned youth in quilted uniform.

'Forbis?'

The salesman clambered to his knees, painfully catching back his breath. He stared at the blood on his hands, and then at Mannock's face above the barrel of the shotgun.

'What the *hell* are you playing at?' he gasped in a weary voice, one ear cocked for any sounds from-the river. 'That shot – do you want to bring them over?' He gestured at the police jacket that Mannock was now wearing, and then shook his head sadly. 'Mannock, this isn't a fancy-dress party . . .'

Mannock was about to explain to him when a car door slammed. The engine of the station-wagon roared above the squeal of tyres. As the two men reached the sidewalk the car was swerving out of the square, bumper knocking aside a pile of cartons.

'Hathaway!' Forbis shouted. 'Did you see him? There's your sniper, Mannock!'

Mannock watched the car plunge out of sight down a side-street. 'Hathaway,' he repeated dourly. 'I should have guessed. He's decided to stay and meet his friends.'

After Forbis had torn the flag down from the hotel mast he and Mannock drove back to the river. Mannock sat uncomfortably in the police jacket, thinking of Hathaway, that strange youth who with himself and Forbis completed one key triangle within their society: Hathaway the misfit, head full of half-baked Marxist slogans, saddled with a bored wife who one day tired of living in rooming-houses and walked out on him, taking their small son; Hathaway the failed political activist, whose obsessed eyes were too much even for a far-left student group; Hathaway the petty criminal, arrested for pilfering a supermarket – though he soon convinced himself that he was a martyr to the capitalist conspiracy.

No doubt one sight of Mannock's old police jacket had been enough.

An hour later the advance began across the river. One minute Mannock was sitting on the old rail-tie that formed the rear wall of Forbis's emplacement, watching the endless parades and drilling that were taking place on the opposite shore, and listening to the gongs and exploding fire-crackers. The next minute dozens of landing-craft were moving down the bank into the water. Thousands of soldiers swarmed after them, bales of equipment held over their heads. The whole landscape had risen up and heaved forward. Half a mile inland vast dust-clouds were climbing into the air. Everywhere the collapsible huts and command posts were coming down, ungainly cranes swung pontoon sections over the trees. The beating of drums sounded for miles along the water's edge. Counting

quickly, Mannock estimated that at least fifty landing-craft were crossing the water, each towing two or three amphibious tanks behind it.

One large wooden landing-craft was headed straight towards them, well over a hundred infantrymen squatting on the deck like coolies. Above the square teak bows a heavy machine-gun jutted through its rectangular metal shield, the gunners signalling to the helmsman.

As Forbis fumbled with his shotgun Mannock knocked the butt off his shoulder.

'Fall back! Nearer the town – they'll come right over us here!'

Crouching down, they backed away from the emplacement. As the first landing-craft hit the shore they reached the cover of the trees lining the road. Forbis sprinted ahead to a pile of fifty-gallon drums lying in the ditch and began to roll them around into a crude emplacement.

Mannock watched him working away, as the air was filled with the noise of tank-engines and gongs. When Forbis had finished Mannock shook his head. He pointed with a tired hand at the fields on either side of the road, then leaned his shotgun against the wall of the ditch.

As far as they could see, hundreds of soldiers were moving up towards the town, rifles and submachine-guns slung over their shoulders. The river bank was crammed with landing-craft. A dozen pontoon bridges spanned the water. Infantry and engineers poured ashore, unloading staff cars and light field pieces. Half a mile away the first soldiers were already moving along the railway line into the town.

Mannock watched a column of infantry march up the road towards them. When they drew nearer he realized that at least half of them were civilians, carrying no weapons or webbing, the women with small red booklets in their hands. On poles over their heads they held giant blown-up photographs of party leaders and generals. A motorcycle and sidecar combination mounting a light machine-gun forced its way past the column, and then stalled in the verge. Chanting together, a group of women and soldiers pushed it free. Together they stamped on after it, bellowing and cheering.

As the motorcycle approached, Mannock waited for the machine-gun to open fire at them. Forbis was crouched behind a fuel drum, frowning over his sights. His large eyes looked like over-boiled eggs. A tic fluttered the right corner of his mouth, as if he were babbling some sub-vocal rosary to himself. Then in a sudden moment of lucidity he turned the shotgun at the motorcycle, but with a roar the machine swerved around Mannock and accelerated towards the town.

Mannock turned to watch it, but a man running past collided with him. Mannock caught his slim shoulders in his hands and set the man on his feet. He looked down into a familiar sallow face, overlit eyes he had last seen staring at him through the bars of a cell.

'Hathaway, you crazy . . .'

Before Mannock could hold him he broke away and ran towards the approaching column striding up the dirt road. He stopped a few feet from

the leading pair of infantrymen and shouted some greeting to them. One of the men, an officer Mannock guessed, though none of the soldiers wore insignia, glanced at him, then reached out and pushed him to one side. Within a moment he was swallowed by the mêlée of gong-beating and chanting soldiers. Buffeted from one shoulder to the next, he lost his balance and fell, stood up and began to wave again at the faces passing him, trying to catch their attention.

Then Mannock too was caught up in the throng. The drab quilted uniforms, stained by the dust and sweat of half a continent, pushed past him, forcing him on to the verge. The shotgun was knocked out of his hands, kicked about in the breaking earth by a score of feet, then picked up and tossed on to the back of a cart. A troupe of young women surrounded Mannock, staring up at him without any curiosity as they chanted their slogans. Most of them were little more than children, with earnest mannequin-like faces under close-cropped hair.

Realizing what had happened, Mannock pulled Forbis from the ditch. No one had tried to take his shotgun from Forbis, and the salesman clung to it like a child. Mannock twisted the weapon out of his hands.

'Can't you understand?' he shouted. 'They're not interested in us! They're not interested at all!'

1969

SAY GOODBYE TO THE WIND

At midnight I heard music playing from the abandoned nightclub among the dunes at Lagoon West. Each evening the frayed melody had woken me as I slept in my villa above the beach. As it started once again I stepped from the balcony on to the warm sand and walked along the shore. In the darkness the beachcombers stood by the tideline, listening to the music carried towards them on the thermal rollers. My torch lit up the broken bottles and hypodermic vials at their feet. Wearing their dead motley, they waited in the dim air like faded clowns.

The nightclub had been deserted since the previous summer, its white walls covered by the dunes. The clouded letters of a neon sign tilted over the open-air bar. The music came from a record-player on the stage, a foxtrot I had forgotten years before. Through the sand-strewn tables walked a young woman with coralline hair, crooning to herself as she gestured with jewelled hands to the rhythm of this antique theme. Her downward eyes and reflective step, like those of a pensive child, made me guess that she was sleepwalking, drawn to this abandoned nightclub from one of the mansions along the shore.

Beside me, near the derelict bar, stood one of the beachcombers. His dead clothes hung on his muscular body like the husk of some violated fruit. The oil on his dark chest lit up his drug-filled eyes, giving his broken face a moment of lucid calm. As the young woman danced by herself in her black nightgown he stepped forward and took her arms. Together they circled the wooden floor, her jewelled hand on his scarred shoulder. When the record ended she turned from him, her face devoid of expression, and walked among the tables into the darkness.

Who was my beautiful neighbour, moving with the certainty of a sleep-walker, who danced each evening with the beachcombers at the deserted nightclub? As I drove into Vermilion Sands the following morning I peered into the villas along the shore in the hope of seeing her again, but the beach was a zone of late-risers still asleep under their sealed awnings. The season at Vermilion Sands was now in full swing. Tourists filled the café terraces and the curio shops. After two or three hectic weeks at festivals devoted to everything from non-aural music to erotic food, most of them would jettison their purchases from their car windows as they sped back to the safety of Red Beach. Running to seed in the sand-reefs on the fringes of Vermilion Sands, the singing flowers and

sculpture formed the unique flora of the landscape, an island ringed by strange sounds.

My own boutique, 'Topless in Gaza', which specialized in bio-fabric fashions, I had opened two years earlier. When I reached the arcade near Beach Drive at eleven o'clock that morning a small crowd was already peering through the window, fascinated by the Op Art patterns unfurling as the model gowns on display flexed and arched themselves in the morning sunlight. My partner, Georges Conte, his art nouveau eyepatch raised over his left eye, was settling an electric-yellow beach-robe on to its stand. For some reason the fabric was unusually skittish, clinging to him like a neurotic dowager. Gripping the wrists with one hand, Georges forced it on to its stand, then stepped back before it could clutch at him again. The robe switched irritably from side to side, the fabric pulsing like an inflamed sun.

As I entered the shop I could see it was going to be one of our more difficult days. Usually I arrived to find the gowns and robes purring on their hangers like the drowsy inmates of an exquisite arboreal zoo. Today something had disturbed them. The racks of model dresses were seething, their patterns livid and discordant. Whenever they touched, the fabrics recoiled from each other like raw membranes. The beach-clothes were in an equal state of unrest, the bandanas and sun-suits throwing off eye-jarring patterns like exhibits in some demented kinetic art.

Hands raised in a gesture of heroic despair, Georges Conte came over to me. His white silk suit glimmered like a bilious rainbow. Even my own mauve day-shirt was unsettled, its seams beginning to shred and unravel.

'Georges, what's happening? The whole place is in uproar!'

'Mr Samson, I wash my hands of them! Sheer temperament, they're impossible to deal with!'

He looked down at his dappled sleeve, and tried to flick away the livid colours with a manicured hand. Upset by the disturbed atmosphere, his suit was expanding and contracting in irregular pulses, pulling across his chest like the fibres of a diseased heart. With a burst of exasperation he picked one of the model gowns from its rack and shook it angrily. 'Quiet!' he shouted, like an impresario calling an unruly chorus line to order. 'Is this "Topless in Gaza" or a demonic zoo?'

In the two years that I had known him Georges had always referred to the dresses and gowns as if they were a troupe of human performers. The more expensive and sensitive fabrics bred from the oldest pedigree stocks he would treat with the charm and savoir-faire he might have reserved for a temperamental duchess. At the opposite extreme, the flamboyant Op Art beachwear he handled with the cavalier charm he displayed to the teenage beauties who often strayed by accident into the boutique.

Sometimes I wondered if for Georges the gowns and suits were more alive than their purchasers. I suspected that he regarded the eventual wearers as little more than animated chequebooks whose sole function

was to feed and exercise the exquisite creatures he placed upon their backs. Certainly a careless or offhand customer who made the mistake of trying to climb into a wrong fitting or, even worse, was endowed with a figure of less than Dietrich-like proportions, would receive brusque treatment from Georges and be directed with the shot of a lace cuff to the inert-wear shops in the town's amusement park.

This, of course, was a particularly bitter jibe. No one, with the exception of a few eccentrics or beachcombers, any longer wore inert clothing. The only widely worn inert garment was the shroud, and even here most fashionable people would not be seen dead in one. The macabre spectacle of the strange grave-flora springing from cracked tombs, like the nightmare collection of some Quant or Dior of the netherworld, had soon put an end to all forms of bio-fabric coffin-wear and firmly established the principle: 'Naked we came into this world, naked we leave it.'

Georges's devotion had been largely responsible for the success and select clientele of the boutique, and I was only too glad to indulge his whimsical belief in the individual personality of each gown and dress. His slim fingers could coax a hemline to shorten itself within seconds instead of hours, take in a pleat or enlarge a gusset almost before the customer could sign her cheque. A particularly exotic gown, unsettled by being worn for the first time or upset by the clammy contact of human skin, would be soothed and consoled by Georges as he patted it into place around its owner's body, his gentle hands caressing the nervous tissues around the unfamiliar contours of hip and bust.

Today, however, his charm and expertise had failed him. The racks of gowns itched and quivered, their colours running into blurred pools. One drawback of bio-fabrics is their extreme sensitivity. Bred originally from the gene stocks of delicate wisterias and mimosas, the woven yarns have brought with them something of the vine's remarkable response to atmosphere and touch. The sudden movement of someone near by, let alone of the wearer, brings an immediate reply from the nerve-like tissues. A dress can change its colour and texture in a few seconds, becoming more décolleté at the approach of an eager admirer, more formal at a chance meeting with a bank manager.

This sensitivity to mood explains the real popularity of bio-fabrics. Clothes are no longer made from dead fibres of fixed colour and texture that can approximate only crudely to the vagrant human figure, but from living tissues that adapt themselves to the contours and personality of the wearer. Other advantages are the continued growth of the materials, fed by the body odours and perspiration of the wearer, the sweet liqueurs distilled from her own pores, and the constant renewal of the fibres, repairing any faults or ladders and eliminating the need for washing.

However, as I walked around the shop that morning I reflected that these immense advantages had been bought at a price. For some reason we had accumulated a particularly temperamental collection. Cases had been reported of sudden panics caused by the backfiring of an engine,

in which an entire stock of model gowns had destroyed themselves in a paroxysm of violence.

I was about to suggest to Georges that we close the shop for the morning when I noticed that the first customer of the day had already arrived. Partly concealed by the racks of beachwear, I could only see an elegantly groomed face veiled by a wide-brimmed hat. Near the doorway a young chauffeur waited in the sunlight, surveying the tourists with a bored glance.

At first I was annoyed that a wealthy customer should arrive at the very moment when our stock was restive – I still remembered with a shudder the bikini of nervous weave that shed itself around its owner's ankles as she stood on the high diving board above the crowded pool at the Neptune Hotel. I turned to ask Georges to use all his tact to get her to leave.

For once, however, he had lost his aplomb. Leaning forward from the waist, eyes focused myopically, he was gazing at our customer like a seedy voyeur of the boulevards starstruck by some sub-teen nymphet.

'Georges! Pull yourself together! Do you know her?'

He glanced at me with blank eyes. 'What?' Already his suit had begun to smooth itself into a glass-like mirror, his invariable response when faced with a beautiful woman. He murmured: 'Miss Channing.'

'Who?'

'Raine Channing . . .' he repeated. 'Before your time, Mr Samson, before anyone's time . . .'

I let him walk past me, hands outstretched in the attitude of Parsifal approaching the Holy Grail. Certainly I remembered her, sometime international model and epitome of eternal youthfulness, with her melancholy, gamine face recreated by a dozen plastic surgeries. Raine Channing was a macabre relic of the 1970s and its teenage cult. Where, in the past, elderly screen actresses had resorted to plastic surgery to lift a sagging cheek or erase a tell-tale wrinkle, in the case of Raine Channing a young model in her early twenties had surrendered her face to the scalpel and needle in order to recapture the child-like bloom of a teenage ingénue. As many as a dozen times she had gone back to the operating theatre, emerging swathed in bandages that were rolled back before the arc lights to reveal a frozen teenage mask. In her grim way, perhaps she had helped to kill this lunatic cult. For some years now she had been out of the public eye, and I remembered only a few months beforehand reading about the death of her confidant and impresario, the brilliant couturier and designer of the first bio-fabric fashions, Gavin Kaiser.

Although now in her late twenties, Raine Channing still preserved her child-like appearance, this strange montage of adolescent faces. Her gaze reflected the suicides of Carole Landis and Marilyn Monroe. As she spoke to Georges in her low voice I realized where I had seen her, dancing with the beachcombers in the deserted nightclub at Lagoon West.

When I bought the boutique the faded fashion magazines had been filled with her photographs . . . Raine with her wounded eyes, looking out above the bandages around her remade cheeks, or wearing the latest bio-fabric

creation at some exclusive discotheque, smiling into Kaiser's handsome gangster face. In many ways the relationship between Raine Channing and this twenty-five-year-old genius of the fashion houses summed up a whole disastrous epoch, of which Raine's mutilated face was a forgotten shrine. One day soon, before she reached the age of thirty, even that face would dissolve.

However, as she visited our boutique this grim prospect seemed a long way distant. Georges was delighted to see her, at last meeting on equal terms one of the too-bright luminaries of his apprenticeship. Without a thought for our disturbed stock, he opened the windows and display cases. Curiously, everything had quietened, the gowns stirring gently on their hangers like docile birds.

I waited for Georges to enjoy his moment of reminiscence, and then introduced myself.

'You've calmed everything down,' I congratulated her. 'They must like you.'

She drew her white fox collar around herself, rubbing her cheek against it. The fur slid around her neck and shoulders, nestling her in its caress. 'I hope so,' she said. 'Do you know, though, a few months ago I hated them? I really wanted everyone in the world to go naked, so that all the clothes would die.' She laughed at this. 'Now I've got to look for a whole new wardrobe.'

'We're delighted you've started here, Miss Channing. Are you staying long in Vermilion Sands?'

'A little while. I first came here a long time ago, Mr Samson. Nothing in Vermilion Sands ever changes, have you noticed? It's a good place to come back to.'

We walked along the displays of gowns. Now and then she would reach out to stroke one of the fabrics, her white hand like a child's. As she opened her coat a sonic jewel, like a crystal rose, emitted its miniature music between her breasts. Velvet playtoys nestled like voles around her wrists. Altogether she seemed to be concealed in this living play-nest like a bizarre infant Venus.

What was it, though, about Raine Channing that so held me? As Georges helped her select a brilliant pastel gown, the other dresses murmuring on the chairs around her, it occurred to me that Raine Channing resembled a child-Eve in a couture-Eden, life springing from her touch. Then I remembered her dancing with the beachcombers in the deserted nightclub at Lagoon West.

While the young chauffeur carried out her purchases I said: 'I saw you last night. At the nightclub by the beach.'

For the first time she looked directly into my face, her eyes alert and adult above the white adolescent mask. 'I live near by', she said, 'in one of the houses along the lake. There was music playing and people dancing.'

As the chauffeur opened the door of the car for her I saw that the seats

were filled with playtoys and sonic jewels. They drove off together like two adults playing at being children.

Two days later I heard music coming again from the abandoned nightclub. As I sat on the veranda in the evening this faint night-music began, the dry metallic sounds muffled by the powdery air. I walked along the shore through the darkness. The beachcombers had gone, but Raine Channing wandered through the tables of the nightclub, her white gown drawing empty signatures in the sand.

A sand-yacht was beached in the shallows. Beside it a bare-chested young man watched with hands on hips. His powerful thighs stood out under his white shorts in the darkness, the thermal surf breaking the dust into ripples around his feet. With his broad face and smashed Michelangelesque nose he resembled some dark beach-angel. He waited as I approached, then stepped forward and walked past me, almost brushing my shoulder. The oil on his back reflected the distant lights of Vermilion Sands as he moved among the dunes towards the nightclub.

After this rendezvous I assumed that we would see no more of Raine Channing, but the next morning when I arrived at the shop in Vermilion Sands I found Georges waiting nervously by the door.

'Mr Samson, I tried to telephone you – Miss Channing's secretary has been calling, everything she bought has gone berserk! Nothing fits, three of the gowns are growing out of weave –'

I managed to calm him down, then spoke to Raine's secretary, a tart-toned Frenchwoman who sharply informed me that the entire wardrobe of two evening gowns, a cocktail dress and three day-suits which Raine had purchased from 'Topless in Gaza' had run to seed. Why this should have happened she had no idea. 'However, Mr Samson, I suggest you drive out immediately to Miss Channing's residence and either replace each item or reimburse the total purchase price of six thousand dollars. The alternative –'

'Mlle Fournier,' I insisted stiffly with what little pride I could muster, 'there is no alternative.'

Before I left, Georges brought out with elaborate care a cyclamen sports-suit in a shantung bio-fabric which he had ordered for one of our millionaire customers.

'For my good name, Mr Samson, if not for yours – at moments such as these one should show the flag.'

The suit clung to me like a willowy, lace-covered cobra, shaping itself to my chest and legs. Its colours glowed and rippled as it explored the contours of my body. As I walked out to my car people turned to look at this exquisite gliding snakeskin.

Five minutes after our arrival at Raine Channing's villa it had quietened down considerably, hanging from my shoulders like a wounded flower. The atmosphere at the villa seemed set for disaster. The young chauffeur

who took my car whipped it away with a snarl of tyres, his eyes moving across my face like razors. Mlle Fournier greeted me with a peremptory nod. A sharp-faced Frenchwoman of about forty, she wore a witchlike black dress that seethed around her angular shoulders with the movements of a shrike.

'An entire wardrobe ruined, Mr Samson! Not only your own gowns, but priceless originals from Paris this season. We are out of our minds here!'

I did my best to calm her. One danger with bio-fabrics is that they are prone to stampede. Moments of domestic crisis, a cry of anger or even a door's slam, can set off a paroxysm of self-destruction. My own suit was already wilting under Mlle Fournier's baleful eye. As we went up the staircase I smoothed the ruffled velvet of the curtains, settling them into their niches. 'Perhaps they're not being worn enough,' I temporized. 'These fabrics do need human contact.'

Mlle Fournier gave me a surprisingly arch glance. We entered a suite on the top floor. Beyond the shaded windows was a terrace, the painted surface of the sand-lake below it. Mlle Fournier gestured at the open wardrobes in the large dressing room. 'Human contact? Precisely, Mr Samson.'

Everywhere there was uproar. Gowns were strewn across the facing sofas. Several had lost all colour and lay blanched and inert. Others had felted, their edges curled and blackened like dead banana skins. Two evening dresses draped over the escritoire had run rogue, their threads interlocking in a macabre embrace. In the wardrobes the racks of gowns hung in restive files, colours pulsing like demented suns.

As we watched I sensed that they were uneasily settling themselves after some emotional outburst earlier that morning. 'Someone's been whipping them into a frenzy,' I told Mlle Fournier. 'Doesn't Miss Channing realize one can't play the temperamental fool near these fabrics?'

She gripped my arm, a barbed finger raised to my lips. 'Mr Samson! We all have our difficulties. Just do what you can. Your fee will be paid immediately.'

When she had gone I moved along the racks and laid out the more damaged dresses. The others I spaced out, soothing the disturbed fabrics until they relaxed and annealed themselves.

I was hunting through the wardrobes in the bedroom next door when I made a curious discovery. Packed behind the sliding doors was an immense array of costumes, faded models of the previous seasons which had been left to die on their hangers. A few were still barely alive. They hung inertly on their racks, responding with a feeble glimmer to the light.

What surprised me was their condition. All of them had been deformed into strange shapes, their colours bled like wounds across the fabric, reflecting the same traumatic past, some violent series of events they had witnessed between Raine Channing and whoever had lived with her in the years past. I remembered the clothes I had seen on a woman killed

in a car crash at Vermilion Sands, blooming out of the wreckage like a monstrous flower of hell, and the demented wardrobe offered to me by the family of an heiress who had committed suicide. Memories such as these outlived their wearers. There was the apocryphal story of the murderer absconding in a stolen overcoat who had been strangled by the garment as it recapitulated the death-throes of its owner.

Leaving these uneasy relics to their dark end, I went back to the dressing room. As I eased the last of the disturbed gowns on to their hangers the terrace door opened behind me.

Raine Channing stepped out of the sun. In place of her clinging white fur she now wore a bio-fabric bikini. The two yellow cups nestled her full breasts like sleeping hands. Despite the clear evidence of some fierce row that morning, she seemed composed and relaxed. As she stared at the now placid tenants of her wardrobe, her white face, like a devious adolescent's, more than ever resembled a surgical mask, the powdered child-face of a Manchu empress.

'Mr Samson! They're quiet now! You're like . . .'

'St Francis calming the birds?' I suggested, still annoyed at having been summoned to Lagoon West. I gestured towards the sealed wardrobes in her bedroom. 'Forgive me saying so, but there are unhappy memories here.'

She picked up my jacket and draped it over her naked shoulders, a gesture of false modesty that none the less held a certain charm. The fabric clung to her like a pink flower, caressing her breasts and arms.

'The past is something of a disaster area, I'm afraid, Mr Samson. I know I brought you out here under false pretences. Something went wrong this morning, and you are the only neighbour I have.' She walked to the window and gazed over the painted lake. 'I came back to Vermilion Sands for reasons that must seem crazy.'

I watched her warily, but something about her apparent frankness destroyed caution. Presumably the midnight lover of the sand-yacht had left the scene, no doubt in a holocaust of emotions.

We went on to the terrace and sat in the reclining chairs beside the bar. During the next hours, and the many that followed in that house without mirrors above the painted lake, she told me something of her years with Gavin Kaiser, and how this young genius from the fashion world had found her singing at the open-air nightclub at Lagoon West. Seeing in this beautiful fifteen-year-old the apotheosis of the teenage cult, Kaiser had made her his star model for the bio-fabric fashions he designed. Four years later, at the age of nineteen, she had her first face-lift, followed by even more extensive plastic surgery in the years immediately after. When Kaiser died she came back to Lagoon West, to the house near the deserted nightclub.

'I left so many pieces of myself behind in all those clinics and hospitals. I thought perhaps I could find them here.'

'How did Kaiser die?' I asked.

'From a heart attack – *they* said. It was some sort of terrible convulsion, as if he'd been bitten by a hundred rabid dogs. He was trying to tear his face to pieces.' She raised her hands to her own white mask.

'Wasn't there some doubt . . . ?' I hesitated.

She held my arm. 'Gavin was mad! He wanted nothing to change between us. Those face-lifts – he kept me at fifteen, but not because of the fashion-modelling. He wanted me for ever when I first loved him.'

At the time, however, I hardly cared why Raine Channing had come back to Lagoon West. Every afternoon I would drive out to her villa and we would lie together under the awning by the bar, watching the changing colours of the painted lake. There, in that house without mirrors, she would tell me her strange dreams, which all reflected her fears of growing young. In the evenings, as the music began to play from the deserted nightclub, we would walk across the dunes and dance among the sand-strewn tables.

Who brought this record-player to the nightclub with its one unlabelled disc? Once, as we walked back, I again saw the young man with the powerful shoulders and broken nose standing by his sand-yacht in the darkness. He watched us as we walked arm in arm, Raine's head against my chest. As she listened to the music jewel in her hand, Raine's eyes stared back like a child's at his handsome face.

Often I would see him at noon, sailing his sand-yacht across the lake a few hundred yards from the shore. I assumed that he was one of Raine's past lovers, watching his successor with a sympathetic curiosity and playing his music for us out of a bizarre sense of humour.

Yet when I pointed him out to Raine one afternoon she denied that she knew him or had even seen him before. Sitting up on one elbow, she watched the sand-yacht beached three hundred yards away along the shore. The young man was walking along the tideline, searching for something among the broken hypodermic vials.

'I can tell him to go away, Raine.' When she shook her head, I said: 'He was here. What happened between you?'

She turned on me sharply. 'Why do you say that?'

I let it pass. Her eyes followed him everywhere.

Two weeks later I saw him again at closer quarters. Shortly after midnight I woke on the terrace of Raine's villa and heard the familiar music coming from the deserted nightclub. Below, in the dim light, Raine Channing walked towards the dunes. Along the beach the thermal rollers whipped the white sand into fine waves.

The villa was silent. Mlle Fournier had gone to Red Beach for a few days, and the young chauffeur was asleep in his apartment over the garages. I opened the gates at the end of the dark, rhododendron-filled drive and walked towards the nightclub. The music whined around me over the dead sand.

The nightclub was empty, the record playing to itself on the deserted stage. I wandered through the tables, searching for any sign of Raine. For a few minutes I waited by the bar. Then, as I leaned over the counter, the slim-faced figure of the chauffeur stood up and lunged at me, his right fist aimed at my forehead.

Sidestepping into his arm, I caught his hand and rammed it on to the counter. In the darkness his small face was twisted in a rictus of anger. He wrenched his arm from me, looking away across the dunes to the lake. The music whined on, the record starting again.

I found them by the beach, Raine with her hand on the young man's hip as he bent down to cast off the yacht. Uncertain what to do, and confused by his off-hand manner as he moved around Raine, I stood among the dunes at the top of the beach.

Feet moved through the sand. I was staring down at Raine's face, its white masks multiplying themselves in the moonlight, when someone stepped behind me and struck me above the ear.

I woke on Raine's bed in the deserted villa, the white moonlight like a waiting shroud across the terrace. Around me the shadows of demented shapes seethed along the walls, the deformed inmates of some nightmare aviary. In the silence of the villa I listened to them tearing themselves to pieces like condemned creatures tormenting themselves on their gibbets.

I climbed from the bed and faced my reflection in the open window. I was wearing a suit of gold lamé which shone in the moonlight like the armour of some archangelic spectre. Holding my bruised scalp, I walked on to the terrace. The gold suit adhered itself to my body, its lapels caressing my chest.

In the drive Raine Channing's limousine waited among the rhododendrons. At the wheel the slim-faced chauffeur looked up at me with bored eyes.

'Raine!' In the rear seat of the car there was a movement of white-clad thigh, a man's bare-backed figure crouching among the cushions. Angered by having to watch the spectacle below in this preposterous suit, I started to tear it from my shoulders. Before I could shout again something seized my calves and thighs. I tried to step forward, but my body was clamped in a golden vice. I looked down at the sleeves. The fabric glowed with a fierce luminescence as it contracted around me, its fibres knotting themselves like a thousand zips.

Already breathing in uncertain spasms, I tried to turn, unable to raise my hands to the lapels that gripped my neck. As I toppled forward on to the rail the headlamps of the car illuminated the drive.

I lay on my back in the gutter, arms clamped behind me. The golden suit glowed in the darkness, its burning light reflected in the thousand glass panes of the house. Somewhere below me the car turned through the gates and roared off into the night.

* * *

A few minutes later, as I came back to consciousness, I felt hands pulling at my chest. I was lifted against the balcony and sat there limply, my bruised ribs moving freely again. The bare-chested young man knelt in front of me, silver blade in hand, cutting away the last golden strips from my legs. The fading remnants of the suit burned like embers on the dark tiles.

He pushed back my forehead and peered into my face, then snapped the blade of his knife. 'You looked like a dying angel, Samson.'

'For God's sake . . .' I leaned against the rail. A network of weals covered my naked body. 'The damn thing was crushing me . . . Who are you?'

'Jason – Jason Kaiser. You've seen me. My brother died in that suit, Samson.'

His strong face watched me, the broken nose and broad mouth making a half-formed likeness.

'Kaiser? Do you mean your brother –' I pointed to the lamé rags on the floor. '– that he was strangled?'

'In a suit of lights. What he saw, God knows, but it killed him. Perhaps now you can make a guess, Samson. Justice in a way, the tailor killed by his own cloth.' He kicked the glowing shreds into the gutter and looked up at the deserted house. 'I was sure she'd come back here. I hoped she'd pick one of the beachcombers but you turned up instead. Sooner or later I knew she'd want to get rid of you.'

He pointed to the bedroom windows. 'The suit was in there somewhere, waiting to live through that attack again. You know, I sat beside her in the car down there while she was making up her mind to use it. Samson, she turns her lovers into angels.'

'Wait – didn't she recognize you?'

He shook his head. 'She'd never seen me – I couldn't stand my brother, Samson. Let's say, though, there are certain ciphers in the face, resemblances one can make use of. That record was all I needed, the old theme tune of the nightclub. I found it in the bar.'

Despite my bruised ribs and torn skin I was still thinking of Raine, and that strange child's face she wore like a mask. She had come back to Lagoon West to make a beginning, and instead found that events repeated themselves, trapping her into this grim recapitulation of Kaiser's death.

Jason walked towards the bedroom as I stood there naked. 'Where are you going?' I called out. 'Everything is dead in there.'

'I know. We had quite a job fitting you into that suit, Samson. They knew what was coming.' He pointed to the headlamps speeding along the lake road five miles to the south. 'Say goodbye to Miss Channing.'

I watched the car disappear among the hills. By the abandoned nightclub the dark air drew its empty signatures across the dunes. 'Say goodbye to the wind.'

1970

THE GREATEST TELEVISION SHOW ON EARTH

The discovery in the year 2001 of an effective system of time travel had a number of important repercussions, nowhere greater than in the field of television. The last quarter of the twentieth century had seen the spectacular growth of television across every continent on the globe, and the programmes transmitted by the huge American, European and Afro-Asian networks each claimed audiences of a billion viewers. Yet despite their enormous financial resources the television companies were faced with a chronic shortage of news and entertainment. Vietnam, the first TV War, had given viewers all the excitement of live transmissions from the battlefield, but wars in general, not to mention newsworthy activity of any kind, had died out as the world's population devoted itself almost exclusively to watching television.

At this point the discovery of time travel made its fortunate appearance.

As soon as the first spate of patent suits had been settled (one Japanese entrepreneur almost succeeded in copyrighting history; time was then declared 'open' territory) it became clear that the greatest obstacle to time travel was not the laws of the physical universe but the vast sums of money needed to build and power the installations. These safaris into the past cost approximately a million dollars a minute. After a few brief journeys to verify the Crucifixion, the signing of Magna Carta and Columbus's discovery of the Americas, the government-financed Einstein Memorial Time Centre at Princeton was forced to suspend operations.

Plainly, only one other group could finance further explorations into the past – the world's television corporations. Their eager assurances that there would be no undue sensationalism convinced government leaders that the educational benefits of these travelogues through time outweighed any possible lapses in taste.

The television companies, for their part, saw in the past an inexhaustible supply of first-class news and entertainment – all of it, moreover, free. Immediately they set to work, investing billions of dollars, rupees, roubles and yen in duplicating the great chronotron at the Princeton Time Centre. Task-forces of physicists and mathematicians were enrolled as assistant producers. Camera crews were sent to key sites – London, Washington and Peking – and shortly afterwards the first pilot programmes were transmitted to an eager world.

These blurry scenes, like faded newsreels, of the coronation of Queen

Elizabeth II, the inauguration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the funeral of Mao Tse-tung triumphantly demonstrated the feasibility of Time Vision. After this solemn unveiling – a gesture in the direction of the government watchdog committees – the television companies began seriously to plan their schedules. The winter programmes for the year 2002 offered viewers the assassination of President Kennedy ('live', as the North American company tactlessly put it), the D-Day landings and the Battle of Stalingrad. Asian viewers were given Pearl Harbor and the fall of Corregidor.

This emphasis on death and destruction set the pace for what followed. The success of the programmes was beyond the planners' wildest dreams. These fleeting glimpses of smoke-crossed battlegrounds, with their burnt-out tanks and landing craft, had whetted an enormous appetite. More and more camera crews were readied, and an army of military historians deployed to establish the exact time at which Bastogne was relieved, the victory flags hoisted above Mount Suribachi and the Reichstag.

Within a year a dozen programmes each week brought to three billion viewers the highlights of World War II and the subsequent decades, all transmitted as they actually occurred. Night after night, somewhere around the world, John F. Kennedy was shot dead in Dealey Plaza, atom bombs exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Adolf Hitler committed suicide in the ruins of his Berlin bunker.

After this success the television companies moved back to the 1914–18 War, ready to reap an even richer harvest of audience ratings from the killing grounds of Passchendaele and Verdun. To their surprise, however, the glimpses of this mud- and shell-filled universe were a dismal failure compared with the great technological battles of World War II being transmitted live at the same time on rival channels from the carrier decks of the Philippine Sea and the thousand-bomber raids over Essen and Dusseldorf.

One sequence alone from World War I quickened the viewers' jaded palates – a cavalry charge by Uhlans of the German Imperial Army. Riding over the barbed wire on their splendid mounts, white plumes flying above the mud, these lance-wielding horsemen brought to a billion war-weary TV screens the magic of pageantry and costume. At a moment when it might have faltered, Time Vision was saved by the epaulette and the cuirass.

Immediately, camera crews began to travel back into the nineteenth century. World Wars I and II faded from the screen. Within a few months viewers saw the coronation of Queen Victoria, the assassination of Lincoln and the siege of the Alamo.

As a climax to this season of instant history, the great Time Vision corporations of Europe and North America collaborated on their most spectacular broadcast to date – a live coverage of the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte at the Battle of Waterloo.

* * *

While making their preparations the two companies made a discovery that was to have far-reaching consequences for the whole history of Time Vision. During their visits to the battle (insulated from the shot and fury by the invisible walls of their time capsules) the producers found that there were fewer combatants actually present than described by the historians of the day. Whatever the immense political consequences of the defeat of Napoleonic France, the battle itself was a disappointing affair, a few thousand march-wearied troops engaged in sporadic rifle and artillery duels.

An emergency conference of programme chiefs discussed this failure of Waterloo to live up to its reputation. Senior producers revisited the battlefield, leaving their capsules to wander in disguise among the exhausted soldiery. The prospect of the lowest audience ratings in the history of Time Vision seemed hourly more imminent.

At this crisis-point some nameless assistant producer came up with a remarkable idea. Rather than sit back helplessly behind their cameras, the Time Vision companies should step in themselves, he suggested, lending their vast expertise and resources to heightening the drama of the battle. More extras – that is, mercenaries recruited from the nearby farming communities – could be thrown into the fray, supplies of powder and shot, distributed to the empty guns, and the entire choreography of the battle re-vamped by the military consultants in the editorial departments. 'History,' he concluded, 'is just a first draft screenplay.'

This suggestion of re-making history to boost its audience appeal was seized upon. Equipped with a lavish supply of gold coinage, agents of the television companies moved across the Belgian and North German plains, hiring thousands of mercenaries (at the standard rate for TV extras of fifty dollars per day on location, regardless of rank, seventy-five dollars for a speaking part). The relief column of the Prussian General Blücher, reputed by historians to be many thousand strong and to have decisively turned the battle against Napoleon, was in fact found to be a puny force of brigade strength. Within a few days thousands of eager recruits flocked to the colours, antibiotics secretly administered to polluted water supplies cured a squadron of cavalry hunters suffering from anthrax, and a complete artillery brigade threatened with typhus was put on its feet by a massive dose of chloromycetin.

The Battle of Waterloo, when finally transmitted to an audience of over one billion viewers, was a brilliant spectacle more than equal to its advance publicity of the past two hundred years. The thousands of mercenaries fought with savage fury, the air was split by non-stop artillery barrages, waves of cavalry charged and recharged. Napoleon himself was completely bewildered by the way events turned out, spending his last years in baffled exile.

After the success of Waterloo the Time Vision companies realized the advantages of preparing their ground. From then onwards almost all important historical events were rescripted by the editorial departments.

Hannibal's army crossing the Alps was found to contain a mere half-dozen elephants – two hundred more were provided to trample down the dumbfounded Romans. Caesar's assassins numbered only two – five additional conspirators were hired. Famous historical orations, such as the Gettysburg Address, were cut and edited to make them more stirring. Waterloo, meanwhile, was not forgotten. To recoup the original investment the battle was sublet to smaller TV contractors, some of whom boosted the battle to a scale resembling Armageddon. However, these spectacles in the De Mille manner, in which rival companies appeared on the same battlefield, pouring in extras, weapons and animals, were looked down on by more sophisticated viewers.

To the annoyance of the television companies, the most fascinating subject in the whole of history remained barred to them. At the stern insistence of the Christian churches the entire events surrounding the life of Christ were kept off the screen. Whatever the spiritual benefits of hearing the Sermon on the Mount transmitted live might be, these were tempered by the prospect of this sublime experience being faded out between beatitudes for the commercial breaks.

Baulked here, the programmers moved further back in time. To celebrate the fifth anniversary of Time Vision, preparations began for a stupendous joint venture – the flight of the Israelites from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea. A hundred camera units and several thousand producers and technicians took up their positions in the Sinai Peninsula. Two months before the transmission it was obvious that there would now be more than two sides in this classic confrontation between the armies of Egypt and the children of the Lord. Not only did the camera crews outnumber the forces of either side, but the hiring of Egyptian extras, additional wave-making equipment and the prefabricated barrage built to support the cameras might well prevent the Israelites from getting across at all. Clearly, the powers of the Almighty would be severely tested in his first important confrontation with the ratings.

A few forebodings were expressed by the more old-fashioned clerics, printed under ironic headlines such as 'War against Heaven?', 'Sinai Truce Offer rejected by TV Producers Guild'. At bookmakers throughout Europe and the United States the odds lengthened against the Israelites. On the day of transmission, January 1st, 2006, the audience ratings showed that 98% of the Western world's adult viewers were by their sets.

The first pictures appeared on the screens. Under a fitful sky the fleeing Israelites plodded into view, advancing towards the invisible cameras mounted over the water. Originally three hundred in number, the Israelites now formed a vast throng that stretched with its baggage train for several miles across the desert. Confused by the great press of camp-followers, the Israelite leaders paused on the shore, uncertain how to cross this shifting mass of unstable water. Along the horizon the sabre-wheeled chariots of Pharaoh's army raced towards them.

The viewers watched spellbound, many wondering whether the television companies had at last gone too far.

Then, without explanation, a thousand million screens went blank.

Pandemonium broke loose. Everywhere switchboards were jammed. Priority calls at inter-governmental level jammed the Comsat relays, the Time Vision studios in Europe and America were besieged.

Nothing came through. All contacts with the camera crews on location had been broken. Finally, two hours later, a brief picture appeared, of racing waters swilling over the shattered remains of television cameras and switchgear. On the near bank, the Egyptian forces turned for home. Across the waters, the small band of Israelites moved towards the safety of Sinai.

What most surprised the viewers was the eerie light that illuminated the picture, as if some archaic but extraordinary method of power were being used to transmit it.

No further attempts to regain contact succeeded. Almost all the world's Time Vision equipment had been destroyed, its leading producers and technicians lost for ever, perhaps wandering the stony rocks of Sinai like a second lost tribe. Shortly after this débâcle, these safaris into the past were eliminated from the world's TV programmes. As one priest with a taste for ironic humour remarked to his chastened television congregation: 'The big channel up in the sky has its ratings too.'

1972

MY DREAM OF FLYING TO WAKE ISLAND

Melville's dream of flying to Wake Island – a hopeless ambition, given all his handicaps – came alive again when he found the crashed aircraft buried in the dunes above the beach-house. Until then, during these first three months at the abandoned resort built among the sandhills, his obsession with Wake Island had rested on little more than a collection of fraying photographs of this Pacific atoll, a few vague memories of its immense concrete runways, and an unfulfilled vision of himself at the controls of a light aircraft, flying steadily westwards across the open sea.

With the discovery of the crashed bomber in the dunes, everything had changed. Instead of spending his time wandering aimlessly along the beach, or gazing from the balcony at the endless sand-flats that stretched towards the sea at low tide, Melville now devoted all his time to digging the aircraft out of the dunes. He cancelled his evening games of chess with Dr Laing, his only neighbour at the empty resort, went to bed before the television programmes began and was up by five, dragging his spades and land-lines across the sand to the excavation site.

The activity suited Melville, distracting him from the sharp frontal migraines that had begun to affect him again. These returning memories of the prolonged ECT treatment unsettled him more than he had expected, with their unequivocal warning that in the margins of his mind the elements of a less pleasant world were waiting to reconstitute themselves. The dream of escaping to Wake Island was a compass bearing of sorts, but the discovery of the crashed aircraft gave him a chance to engage all his energies and, with luck, hold these migraine attacks at bay.

A number of wartime aircraft were buried near this empty resort. Walking across the sand-flats on what Dr Laing believed were marine-biology specimen hunts, Melville often found pieces of allied and enemy fighters shot down over the Channel. Rusting engine blocks and sections of cannon breeches emerged from the sand, somehow brought to the surface by the transits of the sea, and then subsided again without trace. During the summer weekends a few souvenir hunters and World War II enthusiasts picked over the sand, now and then finding a complete engine or wing spar. Too heavy to move, these relics were left where they lay. However, one of the weekend groups, led by a former advertising executive named Tennant, had found an intact Messerschmitt 109 a few feet below the sand half a mile along the coast. The members of the party parked their sports-cars at the bottom of the road below Melville's beach-house,

and set off with elaborate pumps and lifting tackle in a reconditioned DUKW.

Melville noticed that Tennant was usually suspicious and stand-offish with any visitors who approached the Messerschmitt, but the advertising man was clearly intrigued by this solitary resident of the deserted resort who spent his time ambling through the debris on the beach. He offered Melville a chance of looking at the aircraft. They drove out across the wet sand to where the fighter lay like a winged saurian inside its galvanized-iron retaining wall a few feet below the surface of the flat. Tennant helped to lower Melville into the blackened cockpit, an experience which promptly brought on his first fugue.

Later, when Tennant and his co-workers had returned him to the beach-house, Melville sat for hours massaging his arms and hands, uneasily aware of certain complex digital skills that he wanted to forget but were beginning to reassert themselves in unexpected ways. Laing's solarium, with its dials and shutters, its capsule-like interior, unsettled him even more than the cockpit of the 109.

Impressive though the find was, the rusting hulk of the World War II fighter was insignificant beside Melville's discovery. He had been aware of the bomber, or at least of a large engineered structure, for some time. Wandering among the dunes above the beach-house during the warm afternoons, he had been too preoccupied at first with the task of settling in at the abandoned resort, and above all with doing nothing. Despite the endless hours he had spent in the hospital gymnasium, during his long recuperation after the aviation accident, he found the effort of walking through the deep sand soon exhausted him.

At this stage, too, he had other matters to think about. After arriving at the resort he had contacted Dr Laing, as instructed by the after-care officers at the hospital, expecting the physician to follow him everywhere. But whether deliberately or not, Laing had not been particularly interested in Melville, this ex-pilot who had turned up here impulsively in his expensive car and was now prowling restlessly around the solarium as if hunting for a chromium rat. Laing worked at the Science Research Council laboratory five miles inland, and clearly valued the privacy of the prefabricated solarium he had erected on the sand-bar at the southern end of the resort. He greeted Melville without comment, handed him the keys to the beach-house, and left him to it.

This lack of interest was a relief to Melville, but at the same time threw him on to himself. He had arrived with two suitcases, one filled with newly purchased and unfamiliar clothes, the other holding the hospital X-ray plates of his head and the photographs of Wake Island. The X-ray plates he passed to Dr Laing, who raised them to the light, scrutinizing these negatives of Melville's skull as if about to point out some design error in its construction. The photographs of Wake Island he returned without comment.

These illustrations of the Pacific atoll, with its vast concrete runways, he had collected over the previous months. During his convalescence at the hospital he had joined a wildlife conservation society, ostensibly in support of its campaign to save the Wake Island albatross from extinction – tens of thousands of the goony birds nested at the ends of the runways, and would rise in huge flocks into the flight-paths of airliners at take-off. Melville's real interest had been in the island itself, a World War II airbase and now refuelling point for trans-Pacific passenger jets. The combination of scuffed sand and concrete, metal shacks rusting by the runways, the total psychological reduction of this man-made landscape, seized his mind in a powerful but ambiguous way. For all its arid, oceanic isolation, the Wake Island in Melville's mind soon became a zone of intense possibility. He day-dreamed of flying there in a light aircraft, island-hopping across the Pacific. Once he touched down he knew that the migraines would go away for ever. He had been discharged from the Air Force in confused circumstances, and during his convalescence after the accident the military psychiatrists had been only too glad to play their parts in what soon turned out to be an under-rehearsed conspiracy of silence. When he told them that he had rented a house from a doctor in this abandoned resort, and intended to live there for a year on his back pay, they had been relieved to see him go, carrying away the X-ray plates of his head and the photographs of Wake Island.

'But why Wake Island?' Dr Laing asked him on their third chess evening. He pointed to the illustrations that Melville had pinned to the mantelpiece, and the technical abstracts lavishly documenting its geology, rainfall, seismology, flora and fauna. 'Why not Guam? Or Midway? Or the Hawaiian chain?'

'Midway would do, but it's a naval base now – I doubt if they'll give me landing clearance. Anyway, the atmosphere is wrong.' Discussing the rival merits of various Pacific islands always animated Melville, feeding this potent remythologizing of himself. 'Guam is forty miles long, covered with mountains and dense jungle, New Guinea in miniature. The Hawaiian islands are an offshore suburb of the United States. Only Wake has real time.'

'You were brought up in the Far East?'

'In Manila. My father ran a textile company there.'

'So the Pacific area has a special appeal for you.'

'To some extent. But Wake is a long way from the Philippines.'

Laing never asked if Melville had actually been to Wake Island. Clearly Melville's vision of flying to this remote Pacific atoll was unlikely to take place outside his own head.

However, Melville then had the good luck to discover the aircraft buried in the dunes.

When the tide was in, covering the sand-flats, Melville was forced to walk among the dunes above his beach-house. Driven and shaped by

the wind, the contours of the dunes varied from day to day, but one afternoon Melville noticed that a section below the ridge retained its rectilinear form, indicating that some man-made structure lay below the sand, possibly the detached roof of a metal barn or boat-house.

Irritated by the familiar drone of a single-engined aircraft flying from the light airfield behind the resort, Melville clambered up to the ridge through the flowing sand and sat down on the horizontal ledge that ran among the clumps of wild grass. The aircraft, a privately owned Cessna, flew in from the sea directly towards him, banked steeply and circled overhead. Its pilot, a dentist and aviation enthusiast in her early thirties, had been curious about Melville for some time – the mushy drone of her flat six was forever dividing the sky over his head. Often, as he walked across the sand-flats four hundred yards from the shore, she would fly past him, wheels almost touching the streaming sand, throttling up her engine as if trying to din something into his head. She appeared to be testing various types of auxiliary fuel tank. Now and then he saw her driving her American sedan through the deserted streets of the resort towards the airfield. For some reason the noise of her light aircraft began to unsettle him, as if the furniture of his brain was being shifted around behind some dark curtain.

The Cessna circled above him like a dull, unwearying bird. Trying to look as though he was engaged in his study of beach ecology, Melville cleared away the sand between his feet. Without realizing it, he had exposed a section of grey, riveted metal, the skin of an all-too-familiar aerodynamic structure. He stood up and worked away with both hands, soon revealing the unmistakable profile of an aerofoil curvature.

The Cessna had gone, taking the lady dentist back to the air-strip. Melville had forgotten about her as he pushed the heavy sand away, steering it down the saddle between the dunes. Although nearly exhausted, he continued to clear the starboard wing-tip now emerging from the dune. He took off his jacket and beat away the coarse white grains, at last revealing the combat insignia, star and bars of a USAAF roundel.

As he knew within a few minutes, he had discovered an intact wartime B-17. Two days later, by a sustained effort, he had dug away several tons of sand and exposed to view almost the entire starboard wing, the tail and rear turret. The bomber was almost undamaged – Melville assumed that the pilot had run out of fuel while crossing the Channel and tried to land on the sand-flats at low tide, overshot the wet surface and ploughed straight through the dunes above the beach. A write-off, the Fortress had been abandoned where it lay, soon to be covered by the shifting sand-hills. The small resort had been built, flourished briefly and declined without anyone realizing that this relic of World War II lay in the ridge a hundred yards behind the town.

Systematically, Melville organized himself in the task of digging out, and then renovating, this antique bomber. Working alone, he estimated that it

would take three months to expose the aircraft, and a further two years to strip it down and rebuild it from scratch. The precise details of how he would straighten the warped propeller blades and replace the Wright Cyclone engines remained hazy in his mind, but already he visualized the shingle-reinforced earth-and-sand ramp which he would construct with a rented bulldozer from the crest of the dunes down to the beach. When the sea was out, after a long late-summer day, the sand along the tide-line was smooth and hard . . .

Few people came to watch him. Tennant, the former advertising man leading the group digging out the Messerschmitt, came across the sand-flats and gazed abstractedly at the emerging wings and fuselage of the Fortress. Neither of the men spoke to each other – both, as Melville knew, had something more important on their minds.

In the evening, when Melville was still working on the aircraft, Dr Laing walked along the beach from his solarium. He climbed the shadow-filled dunes, watching Melville clear away the sand from the chin-turret.

'What about the bomb-load?' he asked. 'I'd hate to see the whole town levelled.'

'It's an officially abandoned wreck.' Melville pointed to the stripped-down gun turret. 'Everything has been removed, including the machine-guns and bomb-sight. I think you're safe from me, doctor.'

'A hundred years ago you'd have been digging a diplodocus out of a chalk cliff,' Laing remarked. The Cessna was circling the sand-bar at the southern end of the resort, returning after a navigation exercise. 'If you're keen to fly perhaps Helen Winthrop will take you on as a co-pilot. She was asking me something about you the other day. She's planning to break the single-engine record to Cape Town.'

This item of news intrigued Melville. The next day, as he worked at his excavation site, he listened for the sound of the Cessna's engine. The image of this determined woman preparing for her solo flight across Africa, testing her aircraft at this abandoned airfield beside the dunes, coincided powerfully with his own dream of flying to Wake Island. He knew full well now that the elderly Fortress he was laboriously digging from the sand-dunes would never leave its perch on the ridge, let alone take off from the beach. But the woman's aircraft offered a feasible alternative. Already he mapped out a route in his mind, calculating the capacity of her auxiliary tanks and the refuelling points in the Azores and Newfoundland.

Afraid that she might leave without him, Melville decided to approach her directly. He drove his car through the deserted streets of the resort, turned on to the unmade road that led to the airfield, and parked beside her American sedan. The Cessna, its engine cowlings removed, stood at the end of the runway.

She was working at an engineering bench in the hangar, welding together the sections of a fuel tank. As Melville approached she switched off the blowtorch and removed her mask, her intelligent face shielded by her hands.

'I see we're involved in a race to get away first,' she called out reassuringly to him when he paused in the entrance to the hangar. 'Dr Laing told me that you'd know how to strengthen these fuel tanks.'

For Melville, her nervous smile cloaked a complex sexual metaphor.

From the start Melville took it for granted that she would abandon her plan to fly to Cape Town, and instead embark on a round-the-world flight with himself as her co-pilot. He outlined his plans for their westward flight, calculating the reduced fuel load they would carry to compensate for his weight. He showed her his designs for the wing spars and braces that would support the auxiliary tanks.

'Melville, I'm flying to Cape Town,' she told him wearily. 'It's taken me years to arrange this – there's no question of setting out anywhere else. You're obsessed with this absurd island.'

'You'll understand when we get there,' Melville assured her. 'Don't worry about the aircraft. After Wake you'll be on your own. I'll strip off the tanks and cut all these braces away.'

'You intend to stay on Wake Island?' Helen Winthrop seemed unsure of Melville's seriousness, as if listening to an over-enthusiastic patient in her surgery chair outlining the elaborate dental treatment he had set his heart on.

'Stay there? Of course . . .' Melville prowled along the mantelpiece of the beach-house, slapping the line of photographs. 'Look at those runways, everything is there. A big airport like the Wake field is a zone of tremendous possibility – a place of beginnings, by the way, not ends.'

Helen Winthrop made no comment on this, watching Melville quietly. She no longer slept in the hangar at the airstrip, and during her weekend visits moved into Melville's beach-house. Needing his help to increase the Cessna's range, and so reduce the number of refuelling stops with their built-in delays, she put up with his restlessness and child-like excitement, only concerned by his growing dependence on her. As he worked on the Cessna she listened for hours to him describing the runways of the island. However, she was careful never to leave him alone with the ignition keys.

While she was away, working at her dental practice, Melville returned to the dunes, continuing to dig out the crashed bomber. The port and starboard wings were now free of the sand, soon followed by the upper section of the fuselage. The weekends he devoted to preparing the Cessna for its long westward flight. For all his excitability, the state of controlled euphoria which his soon-to-be-realized dream of flying to Wake Island had brought about, his navigation plans and structural modification to the Cessna's air-frame were carefully and professionally carried through.

Even the intense migraines that began to disturb Melville's sleep did little to dent his good humour. He assumed that these fragments of the past had been brought to the surface of his mind by the strains of his involvement with this over-serious aviatrix, but later he knew that

these elements of an unforgotten nightmare had been cued in by the aircraft emerging around him on all sides – Helen Winthrop's Cessna, the Fortress he was exposing to light, the blackened Messerschmitt which the advertising man was lifting from the sea-bed.

After a storm had disturbed the sand-flats, he stood on the balcony of the beach-house inhaling the carbonated air, trying to free himself from the uneasy dreams that had filled the night, a system of demented metaphors. In front of him the surface of the sand-flats was covered with dozens of pieces of rusting metal, aircraft parts shaken loose by the storm. As Helen Winthrop watched from the bedroom window he stepped on to the beach and walked across the ruffled sand, counting the fragments of carburettor and exhaust manifold, trim-tab and tailwheel that lay around him as if left here by the receding tide of his dreams.

Already other memories were massing around him, fragments that he was certain belonged to another man's life, details from the case-history of an imaginary patient whose role he had been tricked into playing. As he worked on the Fortress high among the dunes, brushing the sand away from the cylinder vanes of the radial engines, he remembered other aircraft he had been involved with, vehicles without wings.

The bomber was completely exposed now. Knowing that his work was almost over, Melville opened the ventral crew hatch behind the chin turret. Ever since he had first revealed the cockpit of the plane he had been tempted to climb through the broken starboard windshield and take his seat at the controls, but the experience of the Messerschmitt cautioned him. With Helen Winthrop, however, he would be safe.

Throwing down his spade, he clambered across the sand to the beach-house.

'Helen! Come up here!' He pointed with pride to the exposed aircraft on the ridge, poised on its belly as if at the end of a take-off ramp. While Helen Winthrop tried to calm him, he steered her up the shifting slopes, hand over hand along the rope-line.

As they climbed through the crew hatch he looked back for the last time across the sand-flats, littered with their rusting aircraft parts. Inside the fuselage they searched their way around the barbette of the roof-turret, stepping through the debris of old R/T gear, lifejackets and ammunition boxes. After all his efforts, the interior of the fuselage seemed to Melville like a magical arbour, the grotto-like cavern within some archaic machine.

Sitting beside Helen in the cockpit, happy that she was with him as she would be on their flight across the Pacific, he took her through the controls, moving the throttles and trim wheels.

'Right, now. Mixture rich, carb heat cold, pitch full fine, flaps down for take-off . . .'

As she held his shoulders, trying to pull him away from the controls, Melville could hear the engines of the Fortress starting up within his head.

As if watching a film, he remembered his years as a military test-pilot, and his single abortive mission as an astronaut. By some grotesque turn of fate, he had become the first astronaut to suffer a mental breakdown in space. His nightmare ramblings had disturbed millions of television viewers around the world, as if the terrifying image of a man going mad in space had triggered off some long-buried innate releasing mechanism.

Later that evening, Melville lay by the window in his bedroom, watching the calm sea that covered the sand-flats. He remembered Helen Winthrop leaving him in the cockpit, and running away along the beach to find Dr Laing. Careful though he was, the physician was no more successful at dealing with Melville than the doctors at the institute of aviation medicine, who had tried to free him from his obsession that he had seen a fourth figure on board the three-man craft. This mysterious figure, either man or bird, he was convinced he had killed. Had he, also, committed the first murder in space? After his release he resolved to make his world-wide journey, externally to Wake Island, and internally across the planets of his mind.

As the summer ended and the time of their departure drew nearer, Melville was forced to renew his efforts at digging out the crashed Fortress. In the cooler weather the night winds moved the sand across the ridge, once again covering the fuselage of the aircraft.

Dr Laing visited him more frequently. Worried by Melville's deteriorating condition, he watched him struggle with the tons of sliding sand.

'Melville, you're exhausting yourself.' Laing took the spade from him and began to shovel away. Melville sat down on the wing. He was careful now never to enter the cockpit. Across the sand-flats Tennant and his team were leaving for the winter, the broken-backed Me 109 carried away on two trucks. Conserving his strength, he waited for the day when he and Helen Winthrop would leave this abandoned resort and take off into the western sky.

'All the radio aids are ready,' he told her on the weekend before they were due to leave. 'All you need to do now is file your flight plan.'

Helen Winthrop watched him sympathetically as he stood by the mantelpiece. Unable to stand his nervous vomiting, she had moved back to the hangar. Despite, or perhaps because of, their brief sexual involvement their relationship now was almost matter-of-factly neutral, but she tried to reassure him.

'How much luggage have you got? You've packed nothing.'

'I'm taking nothing – only the photographs.'

'You won't need them once you get to Wake Island.'

'Perhaps – they're more real for me now than the island could ever be.'

When Helen Winthrop left without him Melville was surprised, but not disappointed. He was working up on the dunes as the heavily laden Cessna,

fitted with the wing tanks he had installed, took off from the airstrip. He knew immediately from the pitch of the engine that this was not a trial flight. Sitting on the roof turret of the Fortress, he watched her climb away across the sand-flats, make a steady right-hand turn towards the sea and set off downwind across the Channel.

Long before she was out of sight Melville had forgotten her. He would make his own way to the Pacific. During the following weeks he spent much of his time sheltering under the aircraft, watching the wind blow the sand back across the fuselage. With the departure of Helen Winthrop and the advertising executive with his Messerschmitt he found that his dreams grew calmer, shutting away his memories of the space flights. At times he was certain that his entire memory of having trained as an astronaut was a fantasy, part of some complex delusional system, an extreme metaphor of his real ambition. This conviction brought about a marked improvement in his health and self-confidence.

Even when Dr Laing climbed the dunes and told him that Helen Winthrop had died two weeks after crashing her Cessna at Nairobi airport, Melville had recovered sufficiently to feel several days of true grief. He drove to the airfield and wandered around the empty hangar. Traces of her over-hurried departure, a suitcase of clothes and a spare set of rescue flares, lay among the empty oil-drums.

Returning to the dunes, he continued to dig the crashed bomber from the sand, careful not to expose too much of it to the air. Although often exhausted in the damp winter air, he felt increasingly calm, sustained by the huge bulk of the Fortress, whose cockpit he never entered, and by his dream of flying to Wake Island.

1974

THE AIR DISASTER

The news that the world's largest airliner had crashed into the sea near Acapulco with a thousand passengers on board reached me while I was attending the annual film festival at the resort. When the first radio reports were relayed over the conference loudspeakers I and my fellow journalists abandoned our seats in the auditorium and hurried out into the street. Together we stared silently at the sunlit ocean, almost expecting to see an immense cascade of water rising from the distant waves.

Like everyone else, I realised that this was the greatest disaster in the history of world aviation, and a tragedy equal to the annihilation of a substantial town. I had lost all interest in the film festival, and was glad when the manager of my television station in Mexico City ordered me to drive to the scene of the accident, some thirty miles to the south.

As I set off in my car I remembered when these huge airliners had come into service. Although they represented no significant advance in aviation technology – in effect they were double-decker versions of an earlier airliner – there was something about the figure 1000 that touched the imagination, setting off all kinds of forebodings that no amount of advertising could dispel.

A thousand passengers . . . I mentally counted them off – businessmen, elderly nuns, children returning to their parents, eloping lovers, diplomats, even a would-be hijacker. It was this almost perfect cross-section of humanity, like the census sample of an opinion pollster, that brought the disaster home. I found myself glancing compulsively at the sea, expecting to see the first handbags and life-jackets washed ashore on the empty beaches.

The sooner I could photograph a piece of floating debris and return to Acapulco – even to the triviality of the film festival – the happier I would feel. Unfortunately, the road was jammed with southbound traffic. Clearly every other journalist, both foreign and Mexican, present at the festival had been ordered to the scene of the disaster. Television camera-vans, police vehicles and the cars of over-eager sightseers were soon bumper to bumper. Annoyed by their ghoulish interest in the tragedy, I found myself hoping that there would be no trace of the aircraft when we arrived and stepped onto the beach.

In fact, as I listened to the radio bulletins, there was almost no information about the crash. The commentators already on the site,

cruising the choppy waters of the Pacific in rented motor-boats, reported that there were no signs of any oil or wreckage.

Sadly, however, there was little doubt that the aircraft had crashed somewhere. The flight-crew of another airliner had seen the huge jet explode in mid-air, probably the victim of sabotage. Eerily, the one piece of hard information, constantly played and replayed over the radio, was the last transmission from the pilot of the huge aeroplane, reporting a fire in his cargo hold.

So the aircraft had come down – but where, exactly? For all the lack of information, the traffic continued to press southwards. Behind me, an impatient American newsreel team decide to overtake the line of crawling vehicles on the pedestrian verge, and the first altercations soon broke out. Police stood at the major crossroads, and with their usual flair managed to slow down any progress. After an hour of this, my car's engine began to boil, and I was forced to turn the lame vehicle into a roadside garage.

Sitting irritably in the forecourt, and well aware that I was unlikely to reach the crash site until the late afternoon, I looked away from the almost stationary traffic to the mountains a few miles inland. The foothills of the coastal range, they rose sharply into a hard and cloudless sky, their steep peaks lit by the sun. It occurred to me then that no one had actually witnessed the descent of the stricken airliner into the sea. Somewhere above the mountains the explosion had taken place, and the likely trajectory would have carried the unhappy machine into the Pacific. On the other hand, an observational error of a few miles, the miscalculation of a few seconds by the flight-crew who had seen the explosion, would make possible an impact point well inland.

By coincidence, two journalists in a nearby car were discussing exactly this possibility with the garage attendant filling their fuel tank. This young man was gesturing towards the mountains, where a rough road wound up a steep valley. He slapped his hands together, as if mimicking an explosion.

The journalists watched him sceptically, unimpressed by the story and put off by the young man's rough appearance and almost unintelligible local dialect. Paying him off, they turned their car onto the road and rejoined the slowly moving caravan to the south.

The attendant watched them go, his mind on other things. When he had filled my radiator, I asked him:

'You saw an explosion in the mountains?'

'I might have done – it's hard to say. It could have been lightning or a snow-slide.'

'You didn't see the aircraft?'

'No – I can't say that.'

He shrugged, only interested in going off duty. I waited while he handed over to his relief, climbed onto the back of a friend's motorcycle and set off along the coast with everyone else.

I looked up at the road into the valley. By luck, the farm track

behind the garage joined it four hundred yards inland on the far side of a field.

Ten minutes later I was driving up the valley and away from the coastal plain. What made me follow this hunch that the aircraft had come down in the mountains? Self-interest, clearly, the hope of scooping all my colleagues and at last impressing my editor. Ahead of me was a small village, a run-down collection of houses grouped around two sides of a sloping square. Half a dozen farmers sat outside the tavern, little more than a window in a stone wall. Already the coast road was far below, part of another world. From this height someone would certainly have noticed the explosion if the aircraft had fallen here. I would question a few people; if they had seen nothing I would turn round and head south with everyone else.

As I entered the village I remembered how poverty-stricken this area of Mexico had always been, almost unchanged since the early 19th century. Most of the modest stone houses were still without electricity. There was a single television aerial, and a few elderly cars, wrecks on wheels, sat on the roadside among pieces of rusting agricultural equipment. The worn hill-slopes stretched up the valley, and the dull soil had long since given up its meagre fertility.

However, the chance remained that these villagers had seen something, a flash, perhaps, or even a sight of the stricken airliner plummeting overhead towards the sea.

I stopped my car in the cobbled square and walked across to the farmers outside the tavern.

'I'm looking for the crashed aircraft,' I told them. 'It may have come down near here. Have any of you seen anything?'

They were staring at my car, clearly a far more glamorous machine than anything that might fall from the sky. They shook their heads, waving their hands in a peculiarly secretive way. I knew that I had wasted my time in setting out on this private expedition. The mountains rose around me on all sides, the valleys dividing like the entrances to an immense maze.

As I turned to go back to my car one of the older farmers touched my arm. He pointed casually to a narrow valley sheltering between two adjacent peaks high above us.

'The aircraft?' I repeated.

'It's up there.'

'What? Are you sure?' I tried to control my excitement for fear of giving anything away.

The old man nodded, his interest fading. 'Yes. At the end of that valley. It's a long way.'

Within moments I had set off again, restraining myself with difficulty from over-taxing the engine. The few vague words of this old man convinced me that I was on the right track and about to achieve the scoop I had

yearned for throughout my professional career. However casually he had spoken he had meant what he said.

I pressed on up the narrow road, forcing the car in and out of the potholes and rain-gullies. At each turn of the road I half-expected to see the tailplane of the aircraft poised on a distant crag, and the hundreds of bodies scattered down the mountain slopes like a fallen army. I started to run over in my mind the opening paragraphs of my dispatch, telephoned to my startled editor while my rivals were fifty miles away staring into the empty sea. It was vital to achieve the right marriage of sensation and compassion, that irresistible combination of ruthless realism and melancholy invocation. I would describe the first ominous discovery of a single aircraft seat on a hillside, a poignant trail of ruptured suitcases, a child's fluffy toy and then – a valley floor covered with corpses.

For an hour I pressed on up the road, now and then having to stop and kick away the boulders that blocked my path. This remote infertile region was almost deserted. At intervals an isolated hovel clung to a hillside, a section of telegraph wire followed me overhead for half a mile before ending abruptly, as if the telephone company years beforehand had realised that there was no one here to make or receive a call.

Once again, I began to have second thoughts. Had the old villager been playing me along? Surely if he had seen the aircraft come down he would have been more concerned?

The coastal plain and the sea were now miles behind me, visible only for brief moments as I followed the broken road up the valley. Looking back at the sunlit coast through the rear mirror, I carelessly rolled the car over some heavy rubble. After the collision underneath I could tell from the different note of the exhaust that I had damaged the exhaust.

Cursing myself for having embarked on this lunatic chase, I knew that I was about to strand myself up here in the mountains. Already the early afternoon light was beginning to fade. Fortunately I had ample fuel in the car, but on this narrow road it was impossible to turn the vehicle around.

Forced to go on, I approached a second village, a clutch of hovels built a century earlier around a now deconsecrated chapel. The only level place in which to turn a car was temporarily blocked by two peasants loading firewood onto a cart. As I waited for them to move away I realised how much poorer they were even than the people in the village below them. Their clothes were made partly from leather and partly from animal furs, and they carried shot-guns over their shoulders – weapons, I could tell from the way they looked at me, which they might not hesitate to use if I remained here after dark.

They watched me as I carefully reversed the car, their eyes roving across this expensive sports saloon, the camera equipment on the seat beside me, and even my clothes, all of which must have seemed unbelievably exotic.

To explain my presence, and give myself some kind of official status

that would deter them from emptying their shot-guns into my back as I drove off, I said:

'I've been ordered to look for the aircraft – it came down somewhere near here.'

I moved the gears, about to move off, when one of the men nodded in reply. He put one hand on my windshield, and with the other pointed to a narrow valley lying between twin mountain peaks a thousand feet above us.

As I drove up the mountain road, all my doubts had gone. This time, once and for all, I would prove my worth to a sceptical editor. Two separate witnesses had confirmed the presence of the crashed aircraft. Careful not to damage the car on this primitive track, I pressed on towards the valley high above me.

For the next two hours I moved steadily upwards, ever higher into these bleak mountains. By now all sight of the coastal plain and the sea had gone. Once I caught a brief glimpse of the first village I had passed, far below me like a small stain on a carpet. With luck, the road continued to carry me towards my goal. No more than an earth and stone track, it was barely wide enough to hold the car's wheels as I steered around the endless hairpin bends.

Twice more I stopped to question the few mountain people who watched me from the doors of their earth-floored hovels. However guardedly, they confirmed that the crashed aircraft lay above.

At four o'clock that afternoon, I finally reached the remote valley lying between two mountain peaks, and approached the last of the villages on this long trail. Here the road came to an end in a stony square surrounded by a cluster of dwellings. They looked as if they had been built two hundred years earlier and had spent the intervening time trying to sink back into the mountain.

Most of the village was unpopulated, but to my surprise a few people came out of their houses to look at me, gazing with awe at the dusty car. Immediately I was struck by the extremity of their poverty. These people had nothing. They were destitute, not merely of worldly goods, but of religion, hope, and any knowledge of the rest of mankind. As I stepped from my car and lit a cigarette, waiting as they gathered around me at a respectful distance, it struck me as cruelly ironic that the huge airliner, the culmination of almost a century of aviation technology, should have come to its end here among these primitive mountain-dwellers.

Looking at their unintelligent and passive faces, I felt I was surrounded by a rare group of subnormals, a village of mental defectives amiable enough to be left on their own, high in this remote valley. Perhaps there was some mineral in the soil that damaged their nervous systems and kept them at this simple animal level.

'The aircraft – have you seen the airliner?' I called out. Some ten of the men and women were standing around me, mesmerised by

the car, by my cigarette lighter and gold-rimmed glasses, even by my plump flesh.

'Aircraft –? Here . . .' Simplifying my speech, I pointed to the rocky slopes and ravines above the village, but none of them seemed to understand me. Perhaps they were mute, or deaf. They were guileless enough, but it occurred to me that they might be concealing their knowledge of the crash. What riches they would reap from those thousand corpses, enough treasure to transform their lives for a century. I would have expected this small square to be piled high with aircraft seats, suitcases, bodies stacked like firewood.

'Aircraft . . .' Their leader, a small man with a sallow face no larger than my fist, repeated the word uncertainly. I realised immediately that none of them would know what I was talking about. Their dialect would be some remote sub-tongue, on the borders of intelligent speech.

Searching about for a way of reaching them, I noticed my airline bag packed with camera equipment. The identification tag carried a coloured picture of the huge airliner. Tearing it off the bag, I showed the picture around the group.

Immediately they were nodding away. They muttered to each other, all pointing to a narrow ravine that formed a brief extension of the valley on the other side of the village. A cart track ran towards it, then faded into the stony soil.

'The airliner? It's up there? Good!' Delighted with them, I took out my wallet and showed them the large stack of bank-notes, my generous expenses for the film festival. Waving the notes encouragingly, I turned to the head-man. 'You lead the way. We'll go there now. Many bodies, eh? Cadavers, everywhere?'

They were nodding together, eager eyes staring at the fan of bank-notes.

We set off in the car through the village, following the cart track along the hillside. Half a mile from the village we had to stop when the slope became too steep. The head-man pointed to the mouth of the ravine, and we climbed from the car and set off on foot. Still wearing my festival clothes, I found the going difficult. The floor of the gorge was covered with sharp stones that cut at my shoes. I fell behind my guide, who was scuttling over the stones like a goat.

It surprised me that there were still no signs of the giant airliner, of any debris or the hundreds of bodies. Looking around me, I expected the mountain to be drenched in corpses.

We had reached the end of the gorge. The final three hundred feet of the mountain rose into the air towards the peak, separated from its twin by the valley and the village below. The head-man had stopped, and was pointing to the rocky wall. On his small face was a look of blunted pride.

'Where?' Catching my breath, I took the shroud off my camera lens. 'There's nothing here.'

Then I saw where he had guided me, and what the villagers all the way down to the coastal plain had described. Lying against the wall of the ravine were the remains of a three-engined military aircraft, its crushed nose and cockpit buried in the rocks. The fabric had long been stripped away by the wind, and the aircraft was little more than a collection of rusting spars and fuselage members. Obviously it had been here for more than thirty years, presiding like a tattered deity over this barren mountain. Somehow the fact of its presence had passed down the mountain from one village to the next.

The head-man pointed to the aircraft skeleton. He smiled at me, but his eyes were fixed on my chest, on the wallet in my breast pocket. Already his hand was slightly outstretched. For all his small size, he looked as dangerous as a wild dog.

I took out my wallet and handed him a single bank-note, worth more than he could earn in a month. Perhaps because the denomination was meaningless to him, he pointed aggressively at the other notes.

I fended him off. 'Look – I'm not interested in this aircraft. It's the wrong one, you fool . . . !' When he stared uncomprehendingly at me I took the airline tag from my pocket and showed him the picture of the huge passenger jet. 'This one! Very large. Hundreds of bodies.' Losing my temper, and giving way completely to my outrage and disappointment, I screamed at him: 'It's the wrong one! Can't you understand? There should be bodies everywhere, hundreds of cadavers . . . !'

He left me where I was, ranting away at the stony walls of this deserted ravine high in the mountains, and at the skeleton of this wind-blown reconnaissance plane.

Ten minutes later, when I returned to my car, I discovered that the slow puncture I had suspected earlier that afternoon had flattened one of the front tyres. Exhausted now, my shoes pierced by the rocks, my clothes filthy, I slumped behind the steering wheel, realising the futility of this absurd expedition. I would be lucky to make it back to the coast by night-fall. By then every other journalist would have reported the first sighting of the crashed airliner in the Pacific. My editor would be waiting with growing impatience for me to file my story in time for the evening newscasts. Instead, I was high in these barren mountains with a damaged car, my life possibly threatened by these idiot peasants.

After resting, I pulled myself together. It took me half an hour to change the wheel. As I started the engine and began the long drive back to the coastal plain the light had begun to fade even here at the peak.

The village was three hundred yards below me when I could see the first of the hovels on a bend in the track. One of the villagers was standing beside a low wall, with what seemed to be a weapon in one hand. Immediately I slowed down, knowing that if they decided to attack me I had little hope of escape. I remembered the wallet in my pocket, and took it out, spreading the bank-notes on the seat. Perhaps I could buy my way through them.

As I approached, the man stepped forward into the road. The weapon in his hand was a crude spade. A small man, like all the others, his posture was in no way threatening. Rather, he seemed to be asking me for something, almost begging.

There was a bundle of old clothing on the verge beside the wall. Did he want me to buy it? As I slowed down, about to hand one of the bank-notes to him, I realised that it was an old woman, like a monkey wrapped in a shawl, staring sightlessly at me. Then I saw that her skull-like face was indeed a skull, and that the earth-stained rags were her shroud.

'Cadaver . . .' The man spoke nervously, fingering his spade in the dim light. I handed him the money and drove on, joining the road leading to the village.

Another younger man stood by the verge fifty yards ahead, also with a spade. The body of a small child, freshly disinterred, sat against the lid of its open coffin.

'Cadaver –'

All the way through the village people stood in the doorways, some alone, those who had no one to disinter for me, others with their spades. Freshly jerked from their graves, the corpses sat in the dim light in front of the hovels, propped against the stone walls like neglected relations, put out to at last earn their keep.

As I drove past, handing out the last of my money, I could hear the villagers murmuring, their voices following me down the mountainside.

1975

LOW-FLYING AIRCRAFT

'The man's playing some sort of deranged game with himself.'

From their balcony on the tenth floor of the empty hotel, Forrester and his wife watched the light aircraft taking off from the runway at Ampuriabrava, half a mile down the beach. A converted crop-sprayer with a silver fuselage and open cockpits, the biplane was lining up at the end of the concrete airstrip. Its engine blared across the deserted resort like a demented fan.

'One of these days he's not going to make it – I'm certain that's what he's waiting for . . .' Without thinking, Forrester climbed from his deck-chair and pushed past the drinks trolley to the balcony rail. The aircraft was now moving rapidly along the runway, tail-wheel still touching the tarmac marker line. Little more than two hundred feet of concrete lay in front of it. The runway had been built thirty years earlier for the well-to-do Swiss and Germans bringing their private aircraft to this vacation complex on the Costa Brava. By now, in the absence of any maintenance, the concrete pier jutting into the sea had been cut to a third of its original length by the strong offshore currents.

However, the pilot seemed unconcerned, his bony forehead exposed above his goggles, long hair tied in a brigand's knot. Forrester waited, hands gripping the rail in a confusion of emotions – he wanted to see this reclusive and stand-offish doctor plunge on to the rocks, but at the same time his complicated rivalry with Gould made him shout out a warning.

At the last moment, with a bare twenty feet of runway left, Gould sat back sharply in his seat, almost pulling the aircraft into the air. It rose steeply over the broken concrete causeway, banked and made a low circuit of the sea before setting off inland.

Forrester looked up as it crossed their heads. Sometimes he thought that Gould was deliberately trying to provoke him – or Judith, more likely. There was some kind of unstated bond that linked them.

'Did you watch the take-off?' he asked. 'There won't be many more of those.'

Judith lay back in her sun-seat, staring vaguely at the now silent airstrip. At one time Forrester had played up the element of danger in these take-offs, hoping to distract her during the last tedious months of the pregnancy. But the pantomime was no longer necessary, even today, when they were waiting for the *practicante* to bring the results of the

amniotic scan from Figueras. After the next summer storm had done its worst to the crumbling runway, Gould was certain to crash. Curiously, he could have avoided all this by clearing a section of any one of a hundred abandoned roads.

'It's almost too quiet now,' Judith said. 'Have you seen the *practicante*? He was supposed to come this morning.'

'He'll be here – the clinic is only open one day a week.' Forrester took his wife's small foot and held it between his hands, openly admiring her pale legs without any guile or calculation. 'Don't worry, this time it's going to be good news.'

'I know. It's strange, but I'm absolutely certain of it too. I've never had any doubts, all these months.'

Forrester listened to the drone of the light aircraft as it disappeared above the hills behind the resort. In the street below him the sand blown up from the beach formed a series of encroaching dunes that had buried many of the cars to their windows. Fittingly, the few tyre-tracks that led to the hotel entrance all belonged to the *practicante*'s Honda. The clacking engine of this serious-faced male nurse sounded its melancholy tocsin across the town. He had tended Judith since their arrival two months earlier, with elaborate care but a total lack of emotional tone, as if he were certain already of the pregnancy's ultimate outcome.

None the less, Forrester found himself still clinging to hope. Once he had feared these fruitless pregnancies, the enforced trips from Geneva, and the endless circuit of empty Mediterranean resorts as they waited for yet another seriously deformed foetus to make its appearance. But he had looked forward to this last pregnancy, seeing it almost as a challenge, a game played against enormous odds for the greatest possible prize. When Judith had first told him, six months earlier, that she had conceived again he had immediately made arrangements for their drive to Spain. Judith conceived so easily – the paradox was bitter, this vigorous and unquenched sexuality, this enormous fertility, even if of a questionable kind, at full flood in an almost depopulated world.

'Richard – come on. You look dead. Let's drink a toast to me.' Judith pulled the trolley over to her chair. She sat up, animating herself like a toy. Seeing their reflections in the bedroom mirror, Forrester thought of their resemblance to a pair of latter-day Scott Fitzgeralds, two handsome and glamorous bodies harbouring their guilty secret.

'Do you realize that we'll know the results of the scan by this evening? Richard, we'll have to celebrate! Perhaps we should have gone to Benidorm.'

'It's a huge place,' Forrester pointed out. 'There might be fifteen or twenty people there for the summer.'

'That's what I mean. We ought to meet other people, share the good news with them.'

'Well . . .' They had come to this quiet resort at the northern end of the Costa Brava specifically to get away from everyone – in fact, Forrester

had resented finding Gould here, this hippified doctor who lived in one of the abandoned hotels on the *playa* and unexpectedly turned up in his aircraft after a weekend's absence.

Forrester surveyed the lines of deserted hotels and apartment houses, the long-shuttered rotisseries and supermarkets. There was something reassuring about the emptiness. He felt more at ease here, almost alone in this forgotten town.

As they stood together by the rail, sipping their drinks and gazing at the silent bay, Forrester held his wife around her full waist. For weeks now he had barely been able to take his hands off her. Once Gould had gone it would be pleasant here. They would lie around for the rest of the summer, making love all the time and playing with the baby – a rare arrival now, the average for normal births was less than one in a thousand. Already he could visualize a few elderly peasants coming down from the hills and holding some sort of primitive earth festival on the beach.

Behind them the aircraft had reappeared over the town. For a moment he caught sight of the doctor's silver helmet – one of Gould's irritating affectations was to paint stripes on his helmet and flying-jacket, and on the fenders of his old Mercedes, a sophomore conceit rather out of character. Forrester had come across traces of the paint at various points around the town – on the footbridge over the canal dividing the marina and airstrip at Ampuriabrava from the beach hotels in Rosas, at the corners of the streets leading to Gould's hotel. These marks, apparently made at random, were elements of a cryptic private language. For some time now Forrester had been certain that Gould was up to some nefarious game in the mountains. He was probably pillaging the abandoned monasteries, looting their icons and gold plate. Forrester had a potent vision of this solitary doctor, piloting his light aircraft in a ceaseless search of the Mediterranean littoral, building up a stockpile of art treasures in case the world opened up for business again.

Forrester's last meeting with Gould, in the Dali museum at Figueras, seemed to confirm these suspicions. He had dropped Judith off at the ante-natal clinic, where the amniotic scanning would, they hoped, confirm the absence of any abnormalities in the foetus, and by an error of judgement strolled into this museum dedicated by the town to its most illustrious native artist. As he walked quickly through the empty galleries he noticed Gould lounging back on the central divan, surveying with amiable composure the surrealist's flaccid embryos and anatomical monstrosities. With his silver-flecked jacket and long hair in a knot, Gould looked less like a doctor than a middle-aged Hell's Angel. Beside him on the divan were three canvases he had selected from the walls, and which he later took back to decorate his hotel rooms.

'They're a little too close to the knuckle for me,' Forrester commented. 'A collection of newsreels from Hell.'

'A sharp guess at the future, all right,' Gould agreed. 'The ultimate dystopia is the inside of one's own head.'

As they left the museum Forrester said, 'Judith's baby is due in about three weeks. We wondered if you'd care to attend her?'

Gould made no reply. Shifting the canvases from one arm to the other, he scowled at the trees in the deserted *rambla*. His eyes seemed to be waiting for something. Not for the first time, Forrester realized how tired the man was, the nervousness underlying his bony features.

'What about the *practicante*? He's probably better qualified than I am.'

'I wasn't thinking of the birth, so much, as the . . .'

'As the death?'

'Well . . .' Unsettled by Gould's combative tone, Forrester searched through his stock of euphemisms. 'We're full of hope, of course, but we've had to learn to be realistic.'

'That's admirable of you both.'

'Given one possible outcome, I think Judith would prefer someone like you to deal with it . . .'

Gould was nodding sagely at this. He looked sharply at Forrester. 'Why not keep the child? Whatever the outcome.'

Forrester had been genuinely shocked by this. Surprised by the doctor's aggression, he watched him swing away with an unpleasant gesture, the lurid paintings under his arm, and stride back to his Mercedes.

Judith was asleep in the bedroom. From her loose palm Forrester removed the Valiums she had been too tired to take. He replaced them in the capsule, and then sat unsteadily on the bed. For the last hour he had been drinking alone in the sun on the balcony, partly out of boredom – the time-scale of the human pregnancy was a major evolutionary blunder, he decided – and partly out of confused fear and hope.

Where the hell was the *practicante*? Forrester walked on to the balcony again and scanned the road to Figueras, past the abandoned nightclubs and motorboat rental offices. The aircraft had gone, disappearing into the mountains. As he searched the airstrip Forrester noticed the dark-robed figure of a young woman in the doorway of Gould's hangar. He had seen her mooning around there several times before, and openly admitted to himself that he felt a slight pang of envy at the assumed sexual liaison between her and Gould. There was something secretive about the relationship that intrigued him. Careful not to move, he waited for the young woman to step into the sun. Already, thanks to the alcohol and an over-scrupulous monogamy, he could feel his loins thickening. For all his need to be alone, the thought that there was another young woman within half a mile of him almost derailed Forrester's mind.

Five minutes later he saw the girl again, standing on the observation roof of the Club Náutico, gazing inland as if waiting for Gould's silver aircraft to return.

* * *

As Forrester let himself out of the suite his wife was still asleep. Only two of the suites on the tenth floor were now maintained. The other rooms had been locked and shuttered, time capsules that contained their melancholy cargo, the aerosols, douche-bags, hairpins and sun-oil tubes left behind by the thousands of vanished tourists.

The waiters' service elevator, powered by a small gasolene engine in the basement, carried him down to the lobby. There was no electric current now to run the air-conditioning system, but the hotel was cool. In the two basketwork chairs by the steps, below the postcard rack with its peeling holiday views of Rosas in its tourist heyday, sat the elderly manager and his wife. Señor Cervera had been a linotype operator for a Barcelona newspaper during the years when the population slide had first revealed itself, and even now was a mine of information about the worldwide decline.

'Mrs Forrester is asleep – if the *practicante* comes send him up to her.'

'I hope it's good news. You've waited a long time.'

'If it is we'll certainly celebrate tonight. Judith wants to open up all the nightclubs.'

Forrester walked into the sunlight, climbing over the first of the dunes that filled the street. He stood on the roof of a submerged car and looked at the line of empty hotels. He had come here once as a child, when the resort was still half-filled with tourists. Already, though, many of the hotels were closing, but his parents had told him that thirty years earlier the town had been so crowded that they could barely see the sand on the beach. Forrester could remember the Club Náutico, presiding like an aircraft-carrier over the bars and nightclubs of Ampuriabrava, packed with people enjoying themselves with a frantic *fin de siècle* gaiety. Already the first of the so-called 'Venus hotels' were being built, and coachloads of deranged young couples were coming in from the airport at Gerona.

Forrester jumped from the roof of the car and set off along the beach road towards Ampuriabrava. The immaculate sand ran down to the water, free at last of cigarette-ends and bottle-tops, as clean and soft as milled bone. As he moved past the empty hotels it struck Forrester as strange that he felt no sense of panic at the thought of these vanished people. Like Judith and everyone else he knew, like the old linotype operator and his wife sitting alone in the lobby of their hotel, he calmly accepted the terrifying logic of this reductive nightmare as if it were a wholly natural and peaceful event.

Forty years earlier, by contrast, there had been an uncontrolled epidemic of fear as everyone became aware of the marked fall in the world's population, the huge apparent drop in the birth-rate and, even more disquieting, the immense increase in the number of deformed foetuses. Whatever had set off this process, which now left Forrester standing alone on this once-crowded Costa Brava beach, the results were dramatic and irreversible. At its present rate of decline Europe's population of 200,000

people, and the United States' population of 150,000, were headed for oblivion within a generation.

At the same time, by an unhappy paradox, there had been no fall in fertility, either in man or in the few animal species also affected. In fact, birth-rates had soared, but almost all the offspring were seriously deformed. Forrester remembered the first of Judith's children, with their defective eyes, in which the optic nerves were exposed, and even more disturbing, their deformed sexual organs – these grim parodies of human genitalia tapped all kinds of nervousness and loathing.

Forrester stopped at the end of the beach, where the line of hotels turned at right angles along the entrance channel of the marina. Looking back at the town, he realized that he was almost certainly its last visitor. The continued breakdown of the European road-systems would soon rule out any future journeys to Spain. For the past five years he and Judith had lived in Geneva. Working for a United Nations agency, he moved from city to city across Europe, in charge of a team making inventories of the huge stockpiles of foodstuffs, pharmaceuticals, consumer durables and industrial raw materials that lay about in warehouses and rail terminals, in empty supermarkets and stalled production-lines – enough merchandise to keep the dwindling population going for a thousand years. Although the population of Geneva was some two thousand, most of Europe's urban areas were deserted altogether, including, surprisingly, some of its great cathedral cities – Chartres, Cologne and Canterbury were empty shells. For some reason the consolations of religion meant nothing to anyone. On the other hand, despite the initial panic, there had never been any real despair. For thirty years they had been matter-of-factly slaughtering their children and closing down the western hemisphere like a group of circus workers dismantling their tents and killing their animals at the season's end.

From the bank of the canal Forrester peered up at the white hull of the Club Náutico. There were no signs of the young woman. Behind him, facing the airstrip, was a roadside restaurant abandoned years before. Through the salt-stained windows he could see the rows of bottles against the mirror behind the bar, chairs stacked on tables.

Forrester pushed back the door. The interior of the restaurant was like a museum tableau. Nothing had been moved for years. Despite the unlocked door there had been no vandalism. From the footprints visible in the fine sand blown across the floor it was clear that over the years a few passing travellers had refreshed themselves at the bar and left without doing any damage. This was true of everywhere Forrester had visited. They had vacated a hundred cities and airports as if leaving them in serviceable condition for their successors.

The air in the restaurant was stale but cool. Seated behind the bar, Forrester helped himself to a bottle of Fundador, drinking quietly as he waited for the young woman to reappear. As he gazed across the canal he noticed that Gould had painted two continuous marker lines in fluorescent

silver across the metal slats and wire railing of the footbridge. From the door he could see the same marker lines crossing the road and climbing the steps to Gould's hotel, where they disappeared into the lobby.

Standing unsteadily in the road, Forrester frowned up at the garish façade of the hotel, which had been designed in a crudely erotic Graecian style. Naked caryatids three storeys high supported a sham portico emblazoned with satyrs and nymphs. Why had Gould chosen to live in this hotel, out of all those standing empty in Rosas? Here in what amounted to the red-light quarter of the town, it was one of a group known euphemistically all over the world as the 'Venus hotels', but which Judith more accurately referred to as 'the sex-hotels'. From Waikiki to Glyfada Beach, Rio to Recife, these hotel complexes had sprung up in the first years of the depopulation crisis. A flood of government-subsidised tourists had poured in, urged on into a last frantic festival of erotomania. In a misguided attempt to rekindle their fertility, every conceivable kind of deviant sexual activity had been encouraged. Pornographic hotel decor, lobbies crammed with aids and appliances, ceaseless sex-films shown on closed-circuit television, all these reflected an unhappy awareness by everyone that their sex no longer mattered. The sense of obligation, however residual, to a future generation was no longer present. If anything, the 'normal' had become the real obscenity. In the foyer of one of these hotels Forrester and Judith had come across the most sinister pornographic image of all – the photograph of a healthy baby obscenely retouched.

Judith and her husband had been too young to take part in these despairing orgies, and by the time of their marriage there had been a general revulsion against perverse sex of every kind. Chastity and romantic love, pre-marital celibacy and all the restraints of monogamy came back in force. As the world's populations continued to fall, the last married couples sat dutifully together like characters from a Vermeer interior.

And all the while the sexual drive continued unabated. Feeling the alcohol surge through him, Forrester swayed through the hot sunlight. Somewhere around the hangar beside the airstrip the young woman was waiting for him, perhaps watching him at this moment from its dark interior. Obviously she knew what he was thinking, and almost seemed to be encouraging him with her flirtatious dartings to and fro.

Forrester stepped on to the bridge. Behind him the line of garish hotels was silent, a stage-set designed for just this adventure. The metal rungs of the bridge rang softly under his feet. Tapping them like the keys of a xylophone, Forrester stumbled against the rail, smearing his hands against the still-wet stripe of silver paint.

Without thinking, he wiped his hands on his shirt. The lines of fluorescent paint continued across the bridge, winding in and out of the abandoned cars in the parking lot beside the airstrip. Following Gould's illuminated pathway, Forrester crossed the canal. When he reached the fuel store he saw that the young woman had emerged from the hangar. She

stood in the open doorway, her feet well within the rectangle of sunlight. Her intelligent but somehow mongoloid face was hidden as usual behind heavy sunglasses – a squat chin and high forehead fronted by a carapace of black glass. For all this concealment, Forrester was certain that she had been expecting him, and even more that she had been hoping for him to appear. Inside her black shawl she was moving her hands about like a schoolgirl – no doubt she was aware that he was the only man in the resort, apart from Gould, away on his endless solo flying, and the old linotype operator.

The sweat rose from Forrester's skin, a hot pelt across his forehead. Standing beside the fuel hydrant, he wiped away the sweat with his hands. The young woman seemed to respond to these gestures. Her own hands emerged from the shawl, moving about in a complex code, a semaphore signalling Forrester to her. Responding in turn, he touched his face again, ignoring the silver paint on his hands. As if to ingratiate himself, he smeared the last of the paint over his cheeks and nose, wiping the tacky metal stains across his mouth.

When he reached the young woman and touched her shoulder she looked with sudden alarm at these luminous contours, as if aware that she had been forming the elements of the wrong man from these painted fragments – his hands, chest and features.

Too late, she let herself be bundled backwards into the darkness of the hangar. The sunglasses fell from her hands to the floor. Forrester's luminous face shone back at him like a chromiumed mask from the flight-office windows. He looked down at the sightless young woman scrabbling at his feet for her sunglasses, one hand trying to hide her eyes from him. Then he heard the drone of a light aircraft flying over the town.

Gould's aircraft circled the Club Náutico, the panels of its silver fuselage reflecting the sun like a faceted mirror. Forrester turned from the young woman lying against the rear wall of the hangar, the glasses with their fractured lenses once more over her face. He stepped into the afternoon light and ran across the runway as the aircraft came in to land.

Two hours later, when he had crossed the deserted streets to his hotel, he found Señor Cervera standing on the dune below the steps, hands cupped to his eyes. He waved Forrester towards him, greeting him with relief. Forrester had spent the interval in one of the hotels in the centre of Rosas, moving restlessly from one bathroom to the next as he tried to clean the paint off his face and hands. He had slept for half an hour in a bedroom.

'Mrs Forrester –' The old man gestured helplessly.

'Where is she?' Forrester followed Cervera to the hotel steps. His wife was hovering in an embarrassed way behind her mahogany desk. 'What's happened?'

'The *practicante* arrived – just after you left.' The old man paused to

examine the traces of silver paint that still covered Forrester's face. With a wave of the hand, as if dismissing them as another minor detail of this aberrant day, he said, 'He brought the result to Mrs Forrester . . .'

'Is she all right? What's going on?'

Forrester started towards the elevator but the old woman waved him back. 'She went out – I tried to stop her. She was all dressed up.'

'Dressed? How?'

'In . . . in a very extravagant way. She was upset.'

'Oh, my God . . .' Forrester caught his breath. 'Poor Judith – where did she go?'

'To the hotels.' Cervera raised a hand and pointed reluctantly towards the Venus hotels.

Forrester found her within half an hour, in the bridal suite on the third floor of one of the hotels. As he ran along the canal road, shouting out Judith's name, Gould was walking slowly across the footbridge, flying helmet in hand. The dark figure of the young woman, the lenses of her fractured sunglasses like black suns, followed him sightlessly from the door of the hangar as Gould moved along the painted corridor.

When at last he heard Judith's cry Forrester entered the hotel. In the principal suite on the third floor he discovered her stretched out on the bridal bed, surrounded by the obscene murals and bas-reliefs. She lay back on the dusty lamé bedspread, dressed in a whore's finery she had put together from her own wardrobe. Like a drunken courtesan in the last hours of pregnancy, she stared glassily at Forrester as if not wanting to recognize him. As he approached she picked up the harness beside her on the bed and tried to strike him with it. Forrester pulled it from her hands. He held her shoulders, hoping to calm her, but his feet slipped in the vibrators and film cassettes strewn about the bed. When he regained his balance Judith was at the door. He ran after her down the corridor, kicking aside the display stands of pornographic magazines outside each bedroom. Judith was fleeing down the staircase, stripping off pieces of her costume. Then, thankfully, he saw Gould waiting for her on the landing below, arms raised to catch her.

At dusk, when Gould and Forrester had taken the distraught woman back to the hotel, the two men stood by the entrance in the dusk.

In an unexpected gesture of concern, Gould touched Forrester's shoulder. Apart from this, his face remained without expression. 'She'll sleep till morning. Ask the *practicante* to give you some thalidomide for her. You'll need to sedate her through the next three weeks.'

He pointed to the silver stains on Forrester's face. 'These days we're all wearing our war-paint. You were over at the hangar, just before I landed. Carmen told me that you'd accidentally stepped on her glasses.'

Relieved that the young woman, for whatever reasons, had not betrayed

him, Forrester said, 'I was trying to reassure her – she seemed to be worried that you were overdue.'

'I'm having to fly further inland now. She's nervous when I'm not around.'

'I hadn't realized that she was . . . blind,' Forrester said as they walked down the street towards the canal. 'It's good of you to look after her. The Spaniards would kill her out of hand if they found her here. What happens when you leave?'

'She'll be all right, by then.' Gould stopped and gazed through the fading light at the causeway of the airstrip. A section of the porous concrete seemed to have collapsed into the sea. Gould nodded to himself, as if working out the time left to him by this fragmenting pier. 'Now, what about this baby?'

'It's another one – the same defects. I'll get the *practicante* to deal with it.'

'Why?' Before Forrester could reply, Gould took his arm. 'Forrester, it's a fair question. Which of us can really decide who has the defects?'

'The mothers seem to know.'

'But are they right? I'm beginning to think that a massacre of the innocents has taken place that literally out-Herods Herod. Look, come up with me tomorrow – the Cerveras can look after your wife, she'll sleep all day. You'll find it an interesting flight.'

They took off at ten o'clock the following morning. Sitting in the front cockpit, with the draught from the propeller full in his face, Forrester was convinced that they would crash. At full throttle they moved swiftly along the runway, the freshly broken concrete slabs already visible. Forrester looked over his shoulder, hoping that Gould would somehow manage to stop the aircraft before they were killed, but the doctor's face was hidden behind his goggles, as if he was unaware of the danger. At the last moment, when the cataract of concrete blocks was almost below the wheels, Gould pulled back on the stick. The small aircraft rose steeply, as if jerked into the air by a huge hand. Thirty seconds later Forrester began to breathe.

They levelled out and made a left-hand circuit of the empty resort. Already Gould was pointing with a gloved hand at the patches of phosphorescent paint in the hills above Rosas. Before the take-off, while Forrester sat uncomfortably in the cockpit, wondering why he had accepted this challenge, the young woman had wheeled a drum of liquid over to the aircraft. Gould pumped the contents into the tank which Forrester could see below his feet. As he waited, the young woman walked round to the cockpit and stared up at Forrester, clearly hoping to see something in his face. There was something grotesque, almost comic, about this mongoloid girl surveying the world with her defunct vision through these cracked sunglasses. Perhaps she was disappointed that he was no longer interested in her. Forrester turned away from her sightless

stare, thinking of Judith asleep in the darkened hotel room, and the small and unwelcome tenant of her body.

Eight hundred feet below them was a wide valley that led inland towards the foothills of the Pyrenees. The line of low mountains marked the northern wall of the plain of Ampurdan, a rich farming area where even now there were small areas of cultivation. But all the cattle had gone, slaughtered years beforehand.

As they followed the course of the valley, Forrester could see that sections of the pathways and farm tracks which climbed the hills had been sprayed with phosphorescent paint. Panels of silver criss-crossed the sides of the valley.

So this was what Gould had been doing on his flights, painting sections of the mountainside in a huge pop-art display. The doctor was waving down at the valley floor, where a small, shaggy-haired bullock, like a miniature bison, stood in an apparent daze on an isolated promontory. Cutting back the engine, Gould banked the aircraft and flew low over the valley floor, not more than twenty feet above the creature. Forrester was speculating on how this sightless creature, clearly a mutant, had managed to survive, when there was a sudden jolt below his feet. The ventral spraying head had been lowered, and a moment later a huge gust of silver paint was vented into the air and fanned out behind them. It hung there in a luminescent cloud, and then settled to form a narrow brush-stroke down the side of the mountain. Retracting the spraying head, Gould made a steep circuit of the valley. He throttled up his engine and dived over the head of the bullock, driving it down the mountainside from its promontory. As it stumbled left and right, unable to get its bearings, it crossed the silver pathway. Immediately it gathered its legs together and set off at a brisk trot along this private roadway.

For the next hour they flew up the valley, and Forrester saw that these lines of paint sprayed from the air were part of an elaborate series of trails leading into the safety of the mountains. When they finally turned back, circling a remote gorge above a small lake, Forrester was not surprised to see that a herd of several hundred of the creatures had made their home here. Lifting their heads, they seemed to follow Gould as he flew past them. Tirelessly, he laid down more marker lines wherever they were needed, driving any errant cattle back on to the illuminated pathways.

When they landed at Ampuriabrava he waited on the runway as Gould shut down the aircraft. The young woman came out from the darkness inside the hangar, and stood with her arms folded inside her shawl. Forrester noticed that the sides of the aircraft fuselage and tailplane were a brilliant silver, bathed in the metallic spray through which they had endlessly circled. Gould's helmet and flying-suit, and his own face and shoulders, shone like mirrors, as if they had just alighted from the sun. Curiously, only their eyes, protected by their goggles, were free from the paint, dark orbits into which the young woman gazed as if hoping to find someone of her own kind.

Gould greeted her, handing her his helmet. He stripped off his flying-jacket and ushered her into the hangar.

He pointed across the canal. 'We'll have a drink in your bar.' He led the way diagonally across the car park, ignoring the painted pathways. 'I think there's enough on us for Carmen to know where we are. It gives her a sense of security.'

'How long have you been herding the cattle?' Forrester asked when they were seated behind the bar.

'Since the winter. Somehow one herd escaped the farmers' machetes. Flying down from Perpignan through the Col du Perthus, I noticed them following the aircraft. In some way they could see me, using a different section of the electromagnetic spectrum. Then I realized that I'd sprayed some old landing-light reflector paint on the plane – highly phosphorescent stuff.'

'But why save them? They couldn't survive on their own.'

'Not true – in fact, they're extremely hardy. By next winter they'll be able to out-run and out-think everything else around here. Like Carmen – she's a very bright girl. She's managed to keep herself going here for years, without being able to see a thing. When I started getting all this paint over me I think I was the first person she'd ever seen.'

Thinking again of Judith's baby, Forrester shook his head. 'She looks like a mongol to me – that swollen forehead.'

'You're wrong. I've found out a lot about her. She has a huge collection of watches with luminous dials, hundreds of them, that she's been filching for years from the shops. She's got them all working together but to different times, it's some sort of gigantic computer. God only knows what overlit world nature is preparing her for, but I suppose we won't be around to see it.'

Forrester gazed disagreeably into his glass of brandy. For once the Fundador made him feel ill. 'Gould, are you saying in effect that the child Judith is carrying at this moment is *not* deformed?'

Gould nodded encouragingly. 'It's not deformed at all – any more than Carmen. It's like the so-called population decline that we've all accepted as an obvious truth. In fact, there hasn't been a decline – except in the sense that we've been slaughtering our offspring. Over the past fifty years the birth-rate has gone up, not down.' Before Forrester could protest, he went on, 'Try for a moment to retain an open mind – we have this vastly increased sexuality, and an unprecedented fertility. Even your wife has had – what – seven children. Yet why? Isn't it obvious that we were intended to embark on a huge replacement programme, though sadly the people we're replacing turn out to be ourselves. Our job is simply to repopulate the world with our successors. As for our need to be alone, this intense enjoyment of our own company, and the absence of any sense of despair, I suppose they're all nature's way of saying goodbye.'

'And the runway?' Forrester asked. 'Is that your way of saying goodbye?'

* * *

A month later, as soon as Judith had recovered from the birth of her son, she and Forrester left Rosas to return to Geneva, After they had made their farewells to Señor Cervera and his wife, Forrester drove the car along the beach road. It was 11 a.m., but Gould's aircraft still stood on the airstrip. For some reason the doctor was late.

'It's a long drive – are you going to be well enough?' he asked Judith.

'Of course – I've never felt better.' She settled herself in the seat. It seemed to Forrester that a kind of shutter had been lowered across her mind, hiding away all memories of the past months. She looked composed and relaxed again, but with the amiable and fixed expression of a display-window mannequin.

'Did you pay off the *practicante*?' she asked. 'They expect something extra for . . .'

Forrester was gazing up at the façades of the Venus hotels. He remembered the evening of the birth, and the *practicante* carrying his son away from Señora Cervera. The district nurse had taken it for granted that he would be given the task of destroying the child. As Forrester stopped the Spaniard by the elevator he found himself wondering where the man would have killed it – in some alley behind the cheaper hotels at the rear of the town, or in any one of a thousand vacant bathrooms. But when Forrester had taken the child, careful not to look at its eyes, the *practicante* had not objected, only offering Forrester his surgical bag.

Forrester had declined. After the *practicante* had left, and before Señora Cervera returned to the lobby, he set off through the dark streets to the canal. He had put on again the silver jacket he had worn on the day when Gould had flown him into the mountains. As he crossed the bridge the young woman emerged from the hangar, almost invisible in her dark shawl. Forrester walked towards her, listening to the faint clicking and murmurs of the strong child. He pressed the infant into her hands and turned back to the canal, throwing away his jacket as he ran.

While they drove along the line of hotels to the Figueras road Forrester heard the sounds of the aircraft. Gould was climbing into the cockpit, about to warm up the engine before take-off.

'I never really understood him,' Judith commented. 'What was he up to in the mountains?'

'I don't know – some obsession of his.'

During a brief storm two nights earlier another section of the runway had collapsed. But Forrester knew that Gould would go on flying to the end, driving his herd higher into the mountains, until they no longer needed him and the day had come to take off for the last time.

1975

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF GOD

During the spring and summer of 1980 an extraordinary rumour began to sweep the world. At first confined to government and scientific circles in Washington, London and Moscow, it soon spread through Africa, South America and the Far East, and among people in all walks of life, from Australian sheep-farmers to Tokyo nightclub hostesses and stockbrokers on the Paris Bourse. Rarely a day passed without the rumour reaching the front pages of at least a dozen newspapers around the world.

In a few countries, notably Canada and Brazil, the persistence of the rumour caused a dangerous drop in commodity prices, and firm denials were issued by the governments of the day. At the United Nations headquarters in New York the Secretary-General appointed a committee of prominent scientists, churchmen and business leaders with the sole purpose of restraining the excitement which the rumour was beginning to generate by the late spring. This, of course, simply convinced everyone that something of universal significance would soon be disclosed.

For once, the governments of the West were helped by the sympathetic attitude of the Soviet Union, and of countries such as Cuba, Libya and North Korea, which in the past would have seized on the smallest advantage the rumour offered them. Yet even this failed to prevent serious outbreaks of industrial unrest and panic-selling – millions of pounds were wiped off the London Stock Exchange after the announcement that the Archbishop of Canterbury would visit the Holy Land. A plague of absenteeism swept across the world in the rumour's wake. In areas as far apart as the automotive plants of Detroit and the steel foundries of the Ruhr, entire working populations lost all interest in their jobs and sauntered through the factory gates, gazing amiably at the open sky.

Fortunately, the rumour's effects were generally pacific and non-violent. In the Middle East and Asia, where it confirmed beliefs already held for centuries, the news raised barely a ripple of interest, and only in the most sophisticated government and scientific circles was there anything of a flurry. Without doubt, the impact of the rumour was greatest in Western Europe and North America. Ironically, it was most rife in those two countries, the United States and Britain, which for centuries had claimed to base their entire societies on the ideals expressed by it.

During this period one body alone kept aloof from all this speculation – the world's churches and religious faiths. This is not to say that they were in any way hostile or indifferent, but their attitude indicated a

certain wariness, if not a distinct ambivalence. Although they could hardly deny the rumour, priests and clergymen everywhere recommended a due caution in the minds of their congregations, a reluctance to jump too eagerly to conclusions.

However, a remarkable and unexpected development soon took place. In a solemn declaration, representatives of the world's great religious faiths, meeting simultaneously in Rome, Mecca and Jerusalem, stated that they had at last decided to abandon their rivalries and differences. Together they would now join hands in a new and greater church, to be called the United Faith Assembly, international and interdenominational in character, which would contain the essential elements of all creeds in a single unified faith.

The news of this extraordinary development at last forced the governments of the world to a decision. On August 28th a plenary meeting of the United Nations was held. In a fanfare of publicity that exceeded anything known even by that organization, there was an unprecedented attendance from delegates of every member nation. As the commentators of a hundred television channels carried descriptions of the scene all over the world, a great concourse of scientists, statesmen and scholars, preceded by representatives of the United Faith Assembly, entered the United Nations building and took their seats.

When the meeting began the President of the United Nations called on a succession of prominent scientists, led by the director of the radio-observatory at Jodrell Bank in Britain. After a preamble in which he recalled science's quest for the unifying principle that lay behind the apparent uncertainty and caprice of nature, he described the remarkable research work undertaken during recent years with the telescopes at Jodrell Bank and Arecibo in Puerto Rico. Just as the discovery of radioactivity had stemmed from the realization that even smaller particles existed within the apparently indivisible atom, so these two giant telescopes had revealed that all electromagnetic radiations in fact contained a system of infinitely smaller vibrations. These 'ultra-microwaves', as they had been called, permeated all matter and space.

However, the speaker continued, a second and vastly more important discovery had been made when the structure of these microwaves was analysed by computer. This almost intangible electromagnetic system unmistakably exhibited a complex and continuously changing mathematical structure with all the attributes of intelligence. To give only one example, it responded to the behaviour of the human observer and was even sensitive to his unspoken thoughts. Exhaustive studies of the phenomenon confirmed beyond all doubt that this sentient being, as it must be called, pervaded the entire universe. More exactly, it provided the basic substratum of which the universe was composed. The very air they were breathing in the assembly hall at that moment, their minds and bodies, were formed by this intelligent being of infinite dimensions.

* * *

At the conclusion of the statement a profound silence spread through the General Assembly, and from there to the world beyond. In cities and towns all over the earth the streets were deserted, traffic abandoned as people waited quietly by their television sets. The President of the United Nations then rose and read out a declaration signed by three hundred scientists and divines. After two years of the most rigorous tests the existence of a supreme deity had been proved beyond a shadow of doubt. Mankind's age-old faith in a divine principle had at last been scientifically confirmed, and a new epoch in human history would unfold before them.

The next day the newspapers of the world bore a hundred variants of the same headline:

GOD EXISTS
Supreme Being Pervades Universe

During the following weeks the events of ordinary life were forgotten. All over the world services of thanksgiving were held, religious processions filled countless streets. Vast gatherings of penitents thronged the sacred cities and shrines of the world. Moscow, New York, Tokyo and London resembled medieval towns on an apocalyptic saint's day. Heads raised to the skies, millions knelt in the streets, or walked in slow cavalcades, crosses and mandalas held before them. The cathedrals of St Peter's, Notre Dame and St Patrick's were forced to hold continuous services, so great were the crowds that flocked through their doors. Sectarian feuds were forgotten. Priests of the United Faith Assembly exchanged vestments and officiated at each other's services. Buddhists were baptized, Christians turned prayer-wheels and Jews knelt before the statues of Krishna and Zoroaster.

More practical benefits were to follow. Everywhere doctors reported a marked drop in the numbers of their patients. Neuroses and other mental ills disappeared overnight, as the discovery of the deity's existence worked its instant therapy. All over the world police forces were disbanded. Members of the armed services were sent on indefinite leave pending demobilization, long-closed frontiers were unsealed. The Berlin Wall was dismantled. Everywhere people behaved as if some immense victory had been won against an invincible enemy. Here and there, between particularly aggressive rivals, such as the United States and Cuba, Egypt and Israel, long-standing pacts of friendship were signed. Military aircraft and naval fleets were sent to the scrapyards, stockpiles of weapons were destroyed. (However, a few sporting rifles were retained when the spirit of universal brotherhood produced its first casualty – a Swedish engineer in Bengal who attempted to embrace a tiger. Warnings were issued that an awareness of God's existence had yet to extend to the lower members of the animal kingdom, where for the time being the struggle for life remained as pitiless as ever.)

To begin with, such isolated episodes were barely noticed in the general

euphoria. Thousands of spectators sat around the great telescopes at Jodrell Bank and Arecibo, not to mention a number of commercial TV aerials and any other structures that vaguely resembled radio antennae, waiting patiently for a direct message from the Almighty. Gradually people drifted back to work – or, more exactly, those returned who considered their work morally gainful. Manufacturing industry was able to keep going, but the agencies responsible for selling its products to the public found themselves in a dilemma. The elements of guile and exaggeration at the basis of all merchandizing, whether on the level of nationwide advertising campaigns or door-to-door salesmanship, were no longer tolerable under the new dispensation, but no alternative machinery of distribution was available.

The inevitable slackening of commerce and industry seemed unimportant during these first weeks. The majority of people in Europe and the United States were still celebrating a new estate of man, the beginnings of the first true millennium. The whole basis of private life had changed, and with it attitudes towards sex, morality and all human relationships. Newspapers and television had been transformed – the previous diet of crime reports and political gossip, westerns and soap-operas had given way to serious articles and programmes elaborating the background to the discovery of the deity.

This growing interest in the precise nature of the godhead led to a closer examination of its presumed moral nature. Despite the generalizations of scientists and clergy, it was soon clear that the dimensions of the supreme being were large enough to embrace any interpretation one cared to invent. Although the deity's overall moral purpose could be assumed from the harmony, purity and formal symmetry that the mathematical analyses revealed – qualities more pronounced in response to cohesive and creative actions than to random or destructive ones – these characteristics seemed little more specific in relation to man and his day-to-day behaviour than the principles underlying music. Without doubt a supreme intelligence existed whose being permeated the entire fabric of the universe, flowing in a myriad ripples through their minds and bodies like an infinite moral ether, but this deity seemed far less ready with explicit demands and directives than it had been in its previous incarnations.

Fortunately, their god was clearly neither a jealous nor a vengeful one. No thunderbolt fell from the sky. The first fears of a judgment day, of darkening landscapes covered with gibbets, safely receded. The nightmares of Bosch and Breughel failed to materialize. And for once humanity needed no goads to make it regulate its conduct. Marital infidelities, promiscuity and divorce had almost vanished. Curiously, there was also a drop in the number of marriages, perhaps because of a common feeling that some sort of a millennial kingdom was at hand.

This widespread notion revealed itself in many ways. Great numbers of industrial workers in Europe and North America had lost all interest in their jobs, and sat about on their doorsteps with their neighbours,

gazing at the sky and listening to the radio bulletins. At the summer's end farmers harvested their crops but seemed much less enthusiastic about preparing for the coming season. The flow of pronouncements, and the first disputed interpretations, from the committees of divines and scientists still investigating the phenomenon of the deity suggested that it might be unwise to plan too carefully on an indefinite future.

Within two months of the confirmation of the worldwide rumour of God's existence came the first indications of government concern over the consequences. Industry and agriculture were already affected, though far less than commerce, politics and advertising. Everywhere the results of this new sense of morality, of the virtues of truth and charity, were becoming clear. A legion of overseers, time-keepers and inspectors found themselves no longer needed. Long-established advertising agencies became bankrupt. Accepting the public demand for total honesty, and fearful of that supreme client up in the sky, the majority of television commercials now ended with an exhortation *not* to buy their products.

As for the world of politics, its whole *raison d'être* – its appeals to self-assertion, intrigue and nepotism – had been destroyed. A dozen parliaments, from the US Congress to the Russian Chamber of Deputies and the British House of Commons, found themselves deprived of the very machinery of their existence.

The United Faith Assembly was faced with equal problems. Although people still attended their places of worship in larger numbers than ever before, they were doing so at times other than those of the formal services, communing directly with the Almighty rather than playing the part of a subordinate laity in a ritual mediated to them through a priesthood.

The former Christian members of the United Faith Assembly, who remembered the Reformation and Martin Luther's revolt against a clergy claiming privileged access to the supreme being, were of course perturbed by these developments. They were reluctant to accept the mathematical description of the deity offered by the world's scientists, but had nothing to offer in its place and for the time being were on the defensive. The physicists, conversely, were only too quick to remind the clergy that their long-hallowed symbols – cross, trinity and mandala – were based more on fancy than on the scientific reality which they themselves had made available. The long-standing fear of all churches, that the revelation of God might come from knowledge rather than faith, had at last been justified.

The continued change in the character of life on both sides of the Atlantic began to disturb prominent members of government and industry. Conditions in the United States and Northern Europe were beginning to resemble those in India and the Far East, where legions of amiable beggars wandered the streets without a thought for the morrow. The Kingdom of God might be at hand, but that hand was empty.

During October little happened on the surface of events, but at the end of the month a second meeting of the United Faith Assembly was held in Jerusalem. Here a prominent archbishop publicly challenged the scientific

view of the deity as a being of vast neutral intelligence. Without doubt, the archbishop affirmed, this was to take a naive and over-simplified view based on what were admitted to be crude methods of detection. Was the deity entirely passive or, like the sea, did it reveal itself in many forms and moods? Remarking that he was not ashamed to refer to the Manichean Heresy, the archbishop stressed the dualism of good and evil that had always existed in the past, in man as in nature, and which would continue to exist in the future. This was not to suggest that evil was a fundamental part of man's nature, or that he was incapable of redemption, but this passive contemplation of an invisible God should not be allowed to blind them to the inevitable antagonisms within themselves, or indeed to their own failings. The great achievements of mankind, its commerce, art and industry, had been based on this sound understanding of the dual nature of mankind and its motives. The present decline of civilized life was a symptom of the refusal to see themselves as they were, a warning of the dangers of identifying themselves too closely with the Almighty. The capacity for sin was a prerequisite of redemption.

Soon afterwards, as if cued in by the archbishop, a series of spectacular crimes took place around the world. In the Middle West of the United States a number of bank robberies were carried out which rivalled those of the 1930s. In London there was an armed assault on the crown jewels in the Tower. A host of minor larcenies followed. Not all these crimes were committed for reasons of gain. In Paris the Mona Lisa was slashed by a maniac running amok in the Louvre, while in Cologne the high altar of the Cathedral was desecrated by vandals apparently protesting against the very existence of the deity.

The attitude of the United Faith Assembly to these crimes was unexpected. It greeted them with patient tolerance, as if relieved to see these familiar examples of human frailty. After the arrest of a noted wife-poisoner in Alsace a local priest pronounced that the man's guilt was in fact a testimony to his innocence, a sign of his capacity for eventual redemption.

This tortuous paradox was to receive a great deal of publicity. A number of less scrupulous politicians began to foment similar notions. One Congressional candidate, in a badly hit area of California where military aircraft had been manufactured, suggested that the notion of an all-pervading deity was an affront to the free choice and diversity of human activity. The sense of a closed world reduced man's powers of initiative and self-reliance, the qualities on which the free-enterprise democracies had built their greatness.

This statement was soon followed by the speech of a distinguished metaphysician attending a congress in Zürich. He referred to the plurality of the universe, to its infinite phenomenology. To embrace all possibilities the deity would have to contain the possibility of its own non-being. In other words, it belonged to that class of open-ended structures whose

form, extent and identity were impossible to define. The term 'deity' was, in any useful sense, meaningless.

The scientists at Jodrell Bank and Arecibo who had first identified the Almighty were asked to reconsider their original findings. The televised hearings in Washington, at which the tired-eyed astro-physicists were harassed and cross-examined by teams of lawyers and divines, recalled a latter-day Inquisition. At Jodrell Bank and Arecibo troops were called in to protect the telescopes from crowds of over-hasty converts.

The fierce debates which followed were watched with great attention by the public. By now, in early December, the Christmas season was getting under way, but without any of its usual enthusiasm. For one thing, few stores and shops had anything for sale. In addition, there was little money to spare. The rationing of some basic commodities had been introduced. In many ways life was becoming intolerable. Hotels and restaurants were without service. Cars were forever breaking down.

Everywhere, as the debate continued, people turned to the United Faith Assembly. Mysteriously, however, almost all churches were closed, mosques and synagogues, shrines and temples remained sealed to the unsettled crowds. Members of congregations were now selected as strictly as those of the most exclusive clubs, and applicants were admitted only if they agreed to accept the church's guidance on all spiritual matters, its absolute authority in all religious affairs. A rumour began that an announcement of worldwide importance would shortly be made, but that this time it would be given only to the faithful.

The mounting atmosphere of unease and uncertainty was distracted for a few days by the news of several natural disasters. A landslip in northern Peru immolated a thousand villagers. In Yugoslavia an earthquake shattered a provincial capital. Icebergs sank a supertanker in the Atlantic. The question asked tentatively by a New York newspaper,

DOES GOD EXIST?
Faith Assembly casts doubt on Deity

was relegated to a back page.

Three weeks before Christmas, war broke out between Israel and Egypt. The Chinese invaded Nepal, reclaiming territory which they had only recently ceded while under the spell of what they termed a 'neo-colonialist' machination. A week later revolution in Italy, backed by the church and military, ousted the previous liberal régime. Industrial output began to revive in the United States and Europe. Russian missile-firing submarines were detected on manoeuvres in the North Atlantic. On Christmas Eve the world's seismographs recorded a gigantic explosion in the area of the Gobi Desert, and Peking Radio announced the successful testing of a 100-megaton hydrogen bomb. Christmas decorations had at last appeared in the streets, the familiar figures of Santa Claus and his reindeer hung

over a thousand department-stores. Carol festivals were held before open congregations in a hundred cathedrals.

In all this festivity few people heeded the publication of what was described by a spokesman of the United Faith Assembly as one of the most far-reaching and revolutionary religious statements ever made, the Christmas encyclical entitled *God is Dead . . .*

1976

NOTES TOWARDS A MENTAL BREAKDOWN

A[1] discharged[2] Broadmoor[3] patient[4] compiles[5] 'Notes[6] Towards[7] a[8] Mental[9] Breakdown[10]', recalling[11] his[12] wife's[13] murder[14], his[15] trial[16] and[17] exoneration[18].

1

The use of the *indefinite* article encapsulates all the ambiguities that surround the undiscovered document, *Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown*, of which this 18-word synopsis is the only surviving fragment. Deceptively candid and straightforward, the synopsis is clearly an important clue in our understanding of the events that led to the tragic death of Judith Loughlin in her hotel bedroom at Gatwick Airport. There is no doubt that the role of the still unidentified author was a central one. The self-effacing 'A' must be regarded not merely as an overt attempt at evasion but, on the unconscious level, as an early intimation of the author's desire to proclaim his guilt.

2

There is no evidence that the patient was discharged. Recent inspection of the in-patients' records at Springfield Hospital (cf. footnote 3) indicates that Dr Robert Loughlin has been in continuous detention in the Unit of Criminal Psychopathy since his committal at Kingston Crown Court on 18 May 1975. Only one visitor has called, a former colleague at the London Clinic, the neurologist Dr James Douglas, honorary secretary of the Royal College of Physicians Flying Club. It is possible that he may have given Dr Loughlin, with his obsessional interest in man-powered flight, the illusion that he had flown from the hospital on Douglas's back. Alternatively, 'discharged' may be a screen memory of the revolver shot that wounded the Gatwick security guard.

3

Unconfirmed. Dr Loughlin had at no time in his ten-year career been either a patient or a member of the staff at Broadmoor Hospital. The reference to Broadmoor must therefore be taken as an indirect admission of the author's criminal motives or a confused plea of diminished

responsibility on the grounds of temporary madness. Yet nothing suggests that Dr Loughlin considered himself either guilty of his wife's death or at any time insane. From the remaining documents – tape-recordings made in Suite B17 of the Inn on the Park Hotel (part of the floor occupied by the millionaire aviation pioneer Howard Hughes and his entourage during a visit to London) and cine-films taken of the runways at an abandoned USAAF base near Mildenhall – it is clear that Dr Loughlin believed he was taking part in a ritual of profound spiritual significance that would release his wife forever from the tragedy of her inoperable cancer. Indeed, the inspiration for this strange psychodrama may have come from the former Broadmoor laboratory technician and amateur dramatics coach, Leonora Carrington, whom Loughlin met at Elstree Flying Club, and with whom he had a brief but significant affair.

4

A remarkable feature of Dr Loughlin's confinement at Springfield is how little he conforms to the stereotype of 'patient'. Most of his fellow inmates at the Unit of Criminal Psychopathy are under some form of restraint, but Loughlin's behaviour is closer to that of a member of staff. He has informal access to all the facilities of the Unit, and with his medical training and powerful physique often stands in as an auxiliary nurse, even on occasion diagnosing minor ailments and supervising the administration of drugs. Characteristic of Loughlin is the high level of his general activity. He is forever moving about on errands, many of barely apparent significance, as if preparing for some important event in the future (or, conceivably, in the past). Much of his thought and energy is occupied by the construction of imaginary flying machines, using his bed, desk and personal cutlery. Recently, when his attempts to streamline all the furniture in the day-room unsettled the other patients, Dr Grumman encouraged Loughlin to write about his experiences as a weekend pilot. For the first time Loughlin was prepared to consider any aspect of his past, and immediately came up with a title, *Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown.*

5

What method Dr Loughlin employed in the preparation of this document has not been revealed, or indeed whether a single word exists other than the title. Given the powerful repressive forces at work, it seems likely that the author will employ any method other than that of straightforward narration. A clue may be found in Loughlin's previous experience as editor of the *Proceedings of the Institute of Neurosurgery*, and the habit of meticulous attention to editorial detail which he brought with him to Springfield. One manifestation of this obsession is his custom of annotating the books in the hospital library with copious footnotes.

Several pages of the 1972 edition of *The British Pharmacopoeia Codex*, particularly those referring to anti-carcinogenetic drugs, have been so annotated that every word has been footnoted with imaginary aviation references.

6

Why Loughlin chose this term, with its suggestion of a preparatory sketch, to describe the most important and traumatic events of his life remains unclear. However, it is now known that this was not the only such document that he prepared. Two years earlier, during the first of his marital difficulties, Loughlin had kept a speculative diary, describing in minute detail the events of his personal and professional life. It seems that he was already aware of the erratic nature of his behaviour and of the recurrent fugues, each lasting several days, from which he would emerge in an increasingly dissociated state. At one point, after his wife's first nervous collapse, Loughlin secretly hired a private investigator to follow him, posing as her lover. Mr R. W. Butterworth of the Advance Detection Agency testified at Kingston Crown Court that he followed Loughlin and Leonora Carrington as they drove at random around eastern Suffolk, visiting one abandoned airfield after another. In his February 1975 Diaries (a few weeks before his wife's death) Loughlin describes his attempt to hire the main No. 2 runway at London Airport:

> '*"Don't you understand, man, I only need it for half an hour. There's a special cargo going out." Airport manager totally baffled. "What, for heaven's sake?" But I couldn't tell him. I didn't know then.*'

7

Implicit in Loughlin's use of the preposition is the sense that he deliberately moved to meet his breakdown, constructing it of his own volition. This is confirmed by his behaviour in the months leading to his wife's death. Loughlin appears to have decided on a radically new course of action to save his wife, literally within the extreme metaphor of his own insanity. His wife's subsequent murder, his own breakdown and the entire period of his incarceration at Springfield must thus be regarded as a terminal metaphor, a labyrinth building itself from within which he began at last to unravel by writing *Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown*.

8

Again (cf. footnote 1) the use of the indefinite article underlines Loughlin's distance from his own crisis, which he now (January 1975) regarded as a complex of events and possibilities existing outside himself. Leaving his wife – who was bedridden in their Hendon apartment, cared for by Dr

Douglas, her old friend and former lover – Loughlin embarked on a series of extended excursions around London and the Home Counties. Usually accompanied by Leonora Carrington, he visited the Mullard radio-observatory near Cambridge and the huge complex of early warning radar installations on the Suffolk coast. For some reason, empty swimming pools and multi-storey car parks exerted a particular fascination. All these he seems to have approached as the constituents of 'A' mental breakdown which he might choose to recruit at a later date.

9

How far the events of this period (January to March 1975) were mentalised by Loughlin is hard to decide. To some extent all the factors surrounding Judith Loughlin's death – even the identity of her husband – may be said to be fictions of an over-worked imagination, as meaningless and as meaningful as the elaborate footnotes in *BP Codex*. Was Judith Loughlin suffering from cancer of the pancreas? What was the role of the young lexicographer and ice-dance champion, Richard Northrop, whom Loughlin treated at the London Clinic for migraine? The unmistakable elements of some kind of homo-erotic involvement hover in the background of their relationship. It may be that the apparent physical closeness of the two men masks the fact that they were one and the same man. Their holiday together, the three distressing weeks spent at the Gatwick hotel, and the shot fired at the airport security guard, inevitably recall Rimbaud and Verlaine, but Loughlin may well have passed the time there on his own waiting for his wife to appear with her lover, devising the identity of the lexicographer as a psychic 'detonator'. It is known that he spent much of his spare time stumbling around the airport ice rink.

10

A vital role seems to have been played during these last days by the series of paintings by Max Ernst entitled *Garden Airplane Traps*, pictures of low walls, like the brick-courses of an uncompleted maze, across which long wings have crashed, from whose joints visceral growths are blossoming. In the last entry of his diary, the day before his wife's death, 27 March 1975, Loughlin wrote with deceptive calm: 'Ernst said it all in his comment on these paintings, the model for everything I've tried to do . . .

> *"Voracious gardens in turn devoured by a vegetation which springs from the debris of trapped airplanes . . . Everything is astonishing, heart-breaking and possible . . . with my eyes I see the nymph Echo . . ."*

Shortly before writing out these lines he had returned to his Hendon apartment to find that his wife had set off for Gatwick Airport with Dr Douglas, intending to catch the 3.15 p.m. flight to Geneva the following

day. After calling Richard Northrop, Loughlin drove straight to Elstree Flying Club.

11

The extent to which Loughlin retains any real 'recall' of the events leading to his wife's death is doubtful. On occasions his memory is lucid and unbroken, but it soon becomes evident that he has re-mythologised the entire episode at Gatwick, as revealed in the following taped conversation between himself and Dr Grumman.

GRUMMAN: You say that you then drove to Elstree. Why?
LOUGHLIN: I had rented an aircraft there – a Piper Twin Comanche.
GRUMMAN: I see. Anyway, you then flew across London and on down to Gatwick, where you paralysed the airport for an hour by buzzing all the BEA jets parked on the ground.
LOUGHLIN: I knew that if I could find Judith's plane I could somehow fuse my aircraft with hers, in a kind of transfiguring . . .
GRUMMAN: . . . crash? But why?
LOUGHLIN: I was convinced that I could fly her to safety. It was the only way she would survive her cancer.
GRUMMAN: What actually happened?
LOUGHLIN: I landed and skidded into the nose-wheel of a VC10. Richard Northrop pulled me out. We had some sort of disagreement – he resented my dependence on him, and my involvement with Judith – and then the security guard was accidentally shot.

12

Although there is no doubt that Judith Loughlin had been married to her husband for three years, their relationship was never close, and she in no way could be regarded as 'his'. Before her marriage she had been involved in a long-standing liaison with Dr Douglas, whom she continued to see even after the latter's engagement and marriage in 1974. A successful barrister, self-willed and ambitious, she found herself increasingly unsympathetic towards Loughlin's erratic mental behaviour and incipient alcoholism. It is almost certain that but for her death she would have divorced Loughlin the following year. Viewing her charitably, one may say that her actions that fatal afternoon in the bathroom of her Gatwick hotel had been provoked by years of marital unhappiness.

13

Careful reconstruction of the events surrounding the murder of Judith Loughlin on 28 March 1975, indicates that she had arrived at Gatwick with Dr Douglas the previous day. They passed the night in room 117

of the Skyport Hotel, intending to take the 3.15 p.m. flight to Geneva the following afternoon. It was while they were having lunch in the hotel restaurant that Loughlin appeared at the airport, already in an extreme state of alcoholic distress. He began a futile search among the parked airliners for the Trident jet then being prepared for the 3.15 flight, possibly intending to hijack the plane or even to blow it up with himself aboard. In the course of this search the security guard was shot. Loughlin then made his way to the Skyport Hotel, and by some ruse located and entered his wife's room. Befuddled by a heavy overdose of alcohol and amphetamines, he decided to revive himself in a bath of cold water. He was lying unconscious in the bath, fully clothed, when Judith Loughlin returned alone to her room after lunch.

14

All the evidence collected indicates that Judith Loughlin's decision to murder her husband was a sudden response to the sight of him slumped unconscious in her bath. Shocked by the damage he had done to the room – in his rage Loughlin had torn apart Dr Douglas's clothes and suitcases – she apparently decided to put an end to the sufferings of this unhappy man. Unfortunately she had reckoned neither with Loughlin's powerful physique – the moment she pressed his head below the bath water he leapt up and seized her – nor with the total transformation that had taken place within her husband's mind. Already he seems to have decided that she was leaving him only in the sense that she was dying of pancreatic cancer, and that he might save her by constructing a unique flying machine.

15

Questions as to the exact person indicated by this pronoun have been raised since the moment Loughlin was rescued from the fire blazing in room 117. It was first assumed from the ravings of the injured man that he was an airline pilot. He was sitting on the burning bed in the tandem position behind the charred body of a similarly seated woman, as if giving her pilot tuition. His wife had been forcibly trussed into a flying suit and wore helmet and goggles. She was identified by the double-helix of her intra-uterine device. Thanks to his sodden clothes, only Loughlin's hands and feet had been burned. The furniture in the room had been arranged to form a rough representation of an aircraft, perhaps inspired by the elaborate aeronautical motifs in the bedroom decor.

16

Not surprisingly, the trial exposed all the contradictions inherent in this puzzling case. Questions as to 'Loughlin's' identity continued to be raised. There was no evidence that he was a qualified pilot, though a Private Pilot's

Licence in his name was found in a locker at Elstree Flying Club, perhaps left there as part of a false identity carefully fabricated by him. Certainly he was obsessed with aviation, as his use of aircraft manufacturers' names for his medical colleagues indicates. Nor was there any real confirmation that he was a physician, particularly when we consider his lavish use of meaningless pseudo-medicalese (e.g. 'serotonin[19] and[20] protein-reaction[21] suppressor[22] m.v.d.[23]' etc.).

17

This afterthought, attached to the previous 16 words with their apparently straightforward description of the events leading up to his trial, almost certainly indicates the author's real intent in compiling his ambiguous history.

18

The author's evident conviction of his own innocence, like his earlier belief that he had been discharged from hospital, may be taken as an expression of hope for the future. Meanwhile he continues with his busy round of activities in the Unit of Criminal Psychopathy, constructing his bizarre 'aircraft' and tirelessly editing the footnotes with which he has annotated so many of the medical textbooks in the library. Ultimately the entire stock will have been provided with a unique gloss. As all these books are out-of-date, like the 1972 *BP Codex*, little harm is done. Most of his complex annotations have been shown to be complete fictions, an endlessly unravelling web of imaginary research work, medical personalities and the convoluted and sometimes tragic interrelationships of their private lives. Occasionally, however, they describe with unusual clarity a sequence of events that might almost have taken place. The patient seems trapped between what his psychiatrists call 'paradoxical faces', each image of himself in the mirror reinforcing that in the glass behind him. The separation of the two will only be achieved by the appearance of the as yet incomplete document *Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown*, of which we possess only an 18-word synopsis and its set of footnotes. It seems possible that although the synopsis conceals a maze of lies and distortions, it is a simple and incontrovertible statement of the truth.

1976

THE 60 MINUTE ZOOM

2.15 P.M.

Lloret de Mar, Apartamentos California

I am looking into a silent world. Through the viewfinder of this cine-camera, set at its maximum field, I can see the Hotel Coral Playa three hundred yards along the beach, covered by a desert light so glazed that it would embalm Pharoah. It's incredible that the sea is only a few feet to the right of frame – with this dense powdery light we could be at Karnak, in that tourist hotel by the necropolis where Helen befriended her Stuttgart dentist and first set in train this epic of the amateur camera. The ultimate home movie, perhaps, but so far everything has gone well, thanks to $2500's worth of Nikon Zoomatic and an obliging Barcelona camera specialist. Renting this apartment was the only difficult moment – delivering a second key to my door, did the suspicious Swedish manager catch a glimpse of the complex tripods and clamps I was assembling by the bedroom window? Like the barbette of some sinister assassination weapon, which it is in a way. But this second-rate apartment building provides the only suitable vantage point. The fifteen-storey façade of the Coral Playa must exactly fill the opening sequence – in an hour the automatic zoom will carry me along the carretera, past the hundreds of parked cars and beached speedboats, to within three feet of my target within the bedroom of our tenth-floor hotel suite. A miracle of Japanese lens-cutting. Thinking of the electrifying image, worthy of Bergman or Polanski, that will be the climax of this film almost derails my mind. I listen to the faint susurrus of the zoom motor, the sound of well-bred Osaka matrons at a flower-arrangement course. Despite everything, the degrading but exciting months of anger and suspicion, I feel the first hint of an erection.

2.19 P.M.

Already I am closer to the Coral Playa, the equivalent of perhaps 200 yards away. For the first time I can pick out our own suite, Helen's black water-skis arranged like runes on the balcony. Now and then something flicks through the afternoon light, a bottle-top or cigarette packet flung

from one of the unseen apartment blocks on the left. Lying here on a raised couch in the darkened bedroom, it is hard to believe that the Coral Playa exists at all except as a figment of this view-finder. But the rectilinear façade of the hotel is sharper. The fifteen floors are each taking on a separate identity. There are differences of tone, subtle declensions of balcony geometry that hint at the personalities of the people behind them. The varying angles of the shutters, the beach umbrellas and bikinis hanging on improvised lines, constitute an elaborate personal notation, a complex of ciphers that would send a semiologist into trance. Almost no sky surrounds the hotel, and half the lurid electrographic sign on the roof has been cut away. The image of the hotel's façade, its 150 balconies, is an increasingly abstract entity. As yet there is no sign of movement – Helen will still be on the bed where I left her, a towel around her head, reading her shower-damp copy of American *Vogue* as I set off ostensibly for Barcelona. The guests are still finishing their gaspacho and paella in the hotel restaurant. In the main ground-floor entrance I can identify several of my neighbours sitting in the armchairs and talking to the lobby clerks. They resemble bored marionettes, unable to sustain their roles in this drama in which I have cast them. My main concern is with the two balconies of our suite and the cluster of adjacent rooms. Already the dark interiors are beginning to lighten, I can just distinguish the internal doors that lead to bathrooms and corridors . . .

Wait . . . While my attention is fixed on my own bedroom, impatient for Helen to make her first appearance as the star of this film, I almost fail to notice that a man in a red bath-robe is standing on a balcony five floors above. An American journalist named Anderson, he is looking down at the entrance drive, where a black Mustang has pulled into one of the diagonal parking spaces. The over-heated carapace is about to flow like tar, and for a moment I am too distracted to notice the young man hefting flippers and snorkel from the rear seat. Rademaekers! Panicking, I realize that the young Danish heart surgeon has returned half an hour earlier than I estimated. My zoom may close in on a shot bolt!

2.24 P.M.

I have calmed myself, straightened the damaged blind and re-aligned the tripod. In the last few minutes the scene before me has been totally transformed. Rademaekers has gone straight to the American's room, where he wanders about gesticulating with the flippers. Drink in hand, he seems unlikely to be visiting Helen in the next hour. The Nikon purrs smoothly, carrying me ever nearer the Coral Playa. Little more than an apparent hundred yards from me, the hotel has become a hive of activity as the guests return from the dining room and prepare for siesta. Already I recognize dozens of my neighbours in their bedrooms, the men taking off their shoes, the women testing the beach-towels on the balconies and

examining their teeth in the dressing-table mirrors. These commonplace but almost meaningless activities have an extraordinary fascination, for years I have watched them in a hundred hotels. But now I am glad that Helen has failed to make her entrance. With her entrenched rationality, her over-calculated approach to life in general and the needs of her sexuality in particular, she has always failed to understand the real significance of my obsession with the private behaviour of my neighbours. She cannot grasp that this aimless minor traffic around their bodies, the applications of sun-oil, the dabbing of scent into this or that fossa, represent a continuing authentication of their physical selves, a non-vocal gossip about their armpits and pudenda that no kinaesthetic language, beyond those provided by the instructions on a deodorant or lady-shaver, has yet been found to express. Fifty units of intense private activity, they edge closer to me. On the second floor the young wife of a Marseilles lawyer undresses to reveal a breastless brown body like a catamite's, sits in bed with the sheet over her knees forming a white pyramid, a geometry of remarkable chasteness from which I move my eyes only when I notice that, at last, the central balcony of the film has been mounted by my wife.

2.28 P.M.

A shame that there is no sound-track. Rather than the Polanski or Fellini of the home movie I shall have to become its D.W. Griffith. With his architectural obsessions he would have appreciated the special merits of this film. I am now looking at the façade of the Coral Playa from a distance of fifty yards. Half a dozen floors are visible, a cluster of balconies at whose centre stands my wife. Wayward and erotic, faithless spouse but excellent travelling companion, she is gazing, uncannily, straight towards my camera. The powdery light has cleared, and every detail of the hotel is exposed with the vividness of an hallucination – the rust stains leaking from the balcony rails, the drying swimsuits and discarded paperbacks on the balcony tables, the unfamiliar brands of towel picked up in some provincial Mono-Prix. Oblivious of this plethora of detail swarming around her, Helen is brushing her hair with a reflex hand, revealing the strong muscles of her neck and making the greatest play with her profile for the benefit of the audience watching her from the balconies above and below. For all this attention, she is dressed discreetly in my white towelling robe, no doubt a signal to someone in my absence. Moving my eyes from her, I notice that on the surrounding balconies stands the full complement of her admirers, that troupe of beach-partners, one of whom will play the supporting role in this film. Penelope with her suitors, and I with my Nikon-bow. Even the ever-faithful Argus is there in the bedroom behind her, the dented but still inflated rubber sea-lion which Helen bought me, with cruel irony, two years ago at Venice Lido, and which I, refusing to be outdone, have cared for devotedly ever since, much to her exasperation . . .

2.32 P.M.

Helen has loosened my beach-robe, exposing the entire upper hemisphere of her right breast. There is a quickening of heads and eyes. I feel a familiar surge of excitement as I make a last inventory of my rivals. Rademaekers, the pedantic Danish surgeon who took her snorkelling yesterday, has returned to his room three floors diagonally above ours. Even as he hunts for a clean shirt in his wardrobe he is still holding one of the flippers, like a sea-born land creature clinging obsessively to an obsolete organ. I eliminate him, and move to his neighbour, a thirty-year-old Brighton antique dealer, whose speedboat, during our first week, sat reversing in the shallows ten yards from the beach where Helen and I lay under our umbrellas. Engaging but unscrupulous, he too is taking in his opposition – principally Fradier, the Paris comic-strip publisher two floors above, leaning on his balcony rail beside his attractive wife while openly admiring Helen. But Fradier is moving out of frame, and by the logic of this film can be dropped from the cast-list. As the camera moves nearer I approach the main stage of this vertical drama – a tier of fifteen balconies distributed among five floors, Helen at the centre. Two floors below her, bare-chested in the fierce sunlight, is a minor Italian film actor who arrived only yesterday, bringing with him an anthology of dubious sexual techniques which he had already displayed for Helen in the hotel bar after dinner. His profession would make him my chief suspect, but he too is about to move out of frame, exiting from this reductive fable . . .

Helen is scrutinizing her eyes in a lacquered hand-mirror. She plucks a stray hair from her brow-line with the ruthlessness she always applies to her own body. Even thirty feet away, hovering in the air like an invisible angel, I find this violence unnerving. I realize that I have only been fully at ease with my wife while watching her through the viewfinder of a camera – even within the private space of our various hotel rooms I prefer her seen through a lens, emblematic of my own needs and fantasies rather than existing in her own right. At one time this rightly outraged her, but recently she has begun to play along with my obsession. For hours I watch her, picking her nose and arguing with me about something as I lie on the bed with a camera to my eye, fascinated by the shifting geometries of her thighs and shoulders, the diagrams of her face.

Helen has left the balcony. She tosses the mirror on to the bed, gazes with a pensive frown at the fading but still cheerful expression on the face of the sea-lion, and walks straight through the suite to the front door. Almost before I stifle a shout she has disappeared into the corridor. For the moment I am paralysed. Under my beach-robe she is naked.

2.36 P.M.

Where is she? The camera is closing with the Coral Playa at an unsettling speed. I wonder if the Nikon engineers have at last over-reached themselves. I seem to be no more than ten feet from the façade of the hotel, I can almost reach out and touch the balconies. Only three of the suites are now in frame, our own sandwiched between the Lawrences above us, an affable English couple from Manchester, and a forty-year-old Irish pharmacologist below with whom we have made no contact. These three have involuntarily gate-crashed their way into my film. Meanwhile Helen could be anywhere in the hotel, with Rademaekers or the antique dealer, even with the comic-strip publisher if Mme Fradier has left for the beach. Fumbling with the tripod, I am about to realign the camera when Helen reappears, standing in the centre of the Lawrences' sitting room. Barefoot, hands in the pockets of my white beach-robe, she is talking to Lawrence, a handsome, sandy-haired accountant wearing nothing more than a string swim-slip over his ample crutch. But where is his wife? Is she in the hotel pool, or hidden from me by the lowered bedroom shutter, joining in the conversation through the open door? Confused by this unlikely tryst, I am ready to stop the camera when Lawrence and Helen embrace. I catch my breath, but their kiss is merely a light peck. With a wave, Helen takes a magazine from him and steps into the corridor. Thirty seconds later, as Lawrence wanders around the sitting room patting his groin, Helen re-enters our suite. After a pause, she leaves the door ajar. Her actions are calm and unrushed, but totally conspiratorial. With aching relief, my loins are at full cock long before the heavily built figure of the Irish pharmacologist steps deferentially into the sitting room and locks the door behind him.

2.42 P.M.

Reverie of pain, lust and, above all, child-like hate, in which the slights and antagonisms of a lifetime are subsumed in this unresolvable confrontation between fear and desire, the need and refusal to face the basilisk stare of Helen's sexuality . . . all these modulated by the logic of the zoom, by the geometries of balconies and the laminated gleam of a fashion magazine on a white sheet, the terrifying reductive authority of the encroaching lens. By now the entire frame of the viewfinder is filled by our hotel suite, I seem to be no more than three feet from the nearer of the two balconies, watching Helen and her lover like a theatre-goer in a front stall. So close am I that I fully expect them to incorporate me in their dialogue. Still wearing my beach-robe, Helen strolls around the sitting room, talking away matter-of-factly as if demonstrating a new domestic appliance to

a customer. The pharmacologist sits on the white plastic settee, listening to her in an agreeable way. There is an unforced casualness, a degree of indifference so marked that it is hard to believe they are about to copulate on my bed. Leached away by the camera lens, the dimension of depth is missing from the room, and the two figures have an increasingly abstract relationship to each other, and to the rectilinear forms of the settee, walls and ceiling. In this context almost anything is possible, their movements are a series of postural equations that must have some significance other than their apparent one. As the man lounges back Helen slips off my robe and stands naked in front of him, pointing to the burn marks left by her shoulder straps.

2.46 P.M.

For the first time the camera lens has crossed the balcony and entered the domain of our hotel suite. I am no more than a few steps from the Irishman, who is undressing beside the bed, revealing a muscular physique of a kind that has never previously appealed to Helen. She sits naked on the bidet in the bathroom, clearly visible through the open door, picking at a toenail and staring with a preoccupied expression at the rubber floor-mat. The white porcelain of the bidet, the chromium fitments and the ultramarine tiles of the bathroom together make a curiously formalized composition, as if Vermeer himself had been resurrected and turned loose to recreate his unhurried domestic interiors in the Delft Hilton. Already I feel my anger begin to fade. Annoyingly, my erection also slackens. The transit of this camera across the last forty minutes, which should have brought me to a positive Golgotha of last humiliation, has in fact achieved a gradual abstraction of emotion, an assuagement of all anger and regret. In a way, I feel a kind of affection for Helen.

2.52 P.M.

They lie together on the bed, taking part in a sexual act so relaxed that this camera should film them in slow motion. I am now so close that I might be sitting in the armchair beside the bed. Enlarged by the lens, the movements of their bodies resemble the matings of clouds. Steadily they inflate before me, the vents of their mouths silently working like those of sleeping fish, a planet of anatomical abstractions on which I will soon land. When they come, our orgasms seem to take place in the air above the bed, like the aerial copulation of exotic and gentle birds. Little more than three feet from the camera, the blurred smile of the sea-lion presides over this interlude of nuptial bliss.

2.56 P.M.

Helen is alone now. Her face is out of frame, and through the viewfinder I see only a segment of the pillow, an area of crumpled sheet and the upper section of her chest and shoulders. An almost undifferentiated whiteness fills the lens, marred by the blue hollow of her armpit and the damp sulcus of her right breast, in which a few of the pharmacologist's hairs have been caught. Edging closer, I watch the easy rise and fall of her ribcage . . .

Helen has sat up. Breaking this extended calm, she has turned on one elbow. The sharp movement almost jars the camera, and I realize that far from being asleep she has been lying there fully awake, thinking to herself about something. Her face fills the viewfinder, in the only true close-up of this film. She is looking me straight in the eye, violating our never-spoken agreement in a blatant way. In a blur of light I see her hand pull the sea-lion towards her, then stab with her nails at its worn eyes. Instantly it buckles as the air spurts from the dented plastic.

At this moment I am certain that she has known about this film all along, as she must have known about the others I have made, first with the still Hasselblad as she and the young waiter flirted around the Pontresina ski-lift, later following the Bayreuth Kappellmeister with a cheap cine-camera mounted in the back of the car, productions that have increased in both range and ambition as they led to this present most elaborate exercise of all. But even now, I dream of the ultimate voyeurist film, employing bizarre lenses that reach to some isolated balcony over extraordinary distances, across the Bay of Naples to Capri, or from Dover to a beach hotel in Calais, magnifying the moment of orgasm to a degree of absolute enlargement where the elements of her infidelity become totally abstracted from themselves, areas of undifferentiated light that assuage all anger.

3.05 P.M.

Within a few seconds the camera will reach the limits of its zoom. Helen sleeps on her side with her face away from me. Never faltering, the camera creeps onwards, excluding more and more details from the edges of its frame, the stray hairs of her lover, the damp sweat-prints of her shoulder blades on the sheet. Yet I am aware that there has been a sudden intrusion into the white spaces of the bedroom. What are unmistakably parts of a man's shoes and trousers have appeared soundlessly beside the bed, pausing by the sagging beach-toy. Helen sleeps on, her malice forgotten, unaware of the flash of chromium light that irradiates the screen. Fascinated, with no sense of alarm, I watch the movements of this mysterious intruder, the articulated volumes of almost unrelated forms.

Only a white field is now visible, detached from all needs and concessions, a primed canvas waiting for its first brush stroke. Applauding, I see the screen fill with sudden red.

3.15 P.M.

The man kneels beside the bed, watching the elaborate patterns formed by the quiet blood as it runs across the sheet, hunting a hundred gradients. As he turns, exposing his face to the camera, I recognize myself. The sea-lion, my faithful Argus, expires at my feet. As always when I see this film and listen to its commentary, the infinite dream of the sixty-minute zoom, I remember the long journey across the dust and noise of Lloret, past the clamour of the sea to the serene world within this hotel bedroom, to my faithful wife rediscovered in the marriage of red and white.

1976

THE SMILE

Now that a nightmare logic has run its course, it is hard to believe that my friends and I thought it the most innocent caprice when I first brought Serena Cockayne to live with me in my Chelsea house. Two subjects have always fascinated me – woman and the bizarre – and Serena combined them both, though not in any crude or perverse sense. During the extended dinner parties that carried us through our first summer together three years ago her presence beside me, beautiful, silent and forever reassuring in its strange way, was surrounded by all kinds of complex and charming ironies.

No one who met Serena failed to be delighted by her. She would sit demurely in her gilt chair by the sitting-room door, the blue folds of her brocade gown embracing her like a gentle and devoted sea. At dinner, when my guests had taken their seats, they would watch with amused and tolerant affection as I carried Serena to her place at the opposite end of the table. Her faint smile, the most delicate bloom of that peerless skin, presided over our elaborate evenings with unvarying calm. When the last of my guests had gone, paying their respects to Serena as she watched them from the hall, head inclined to one side in that characteristic pose of hers, I would carry her happily to my bedroom.

Of course Serena never took part in any of our conversations, and no doubt this was a vital element of her appeal. My friends and I belonged to that generation of men who had been forced in early middle age, by sexual necessity if nothing else, to a weary acceptance of militant feminism, and there was something about Serena's passive beauty, her immaculate but old-fashioned make-up, and above all her unbroken silence that spelled out a deep and pleasing deference to our wounded masculinity. In all senses, Serena was the kind of woman that men invent.

But this was before I realized the true nature of Serena's character, and the more ambiguous role she was to play in my life, from which I wait now with so much longing to be freed.

Appropriately enough – though the irony then escaped me completely – I first saw Serena Cockayne at the World's End, in that area at the lower end of the King's Road now occupied by a cluster of high-rise apartment blocks but which only three years ago was still an enclave of second-rate antique shops, scruffy boutiques and nineteenth-century terrace housing over-ripe for redevelopment. Pausing on my way home from the office

by a small curio shop announcing its closing-down sale, I peered through the sulphur-stained windows at the few remnants on display. Almost everything had gone, except for a clutch of ragged Victorian umbrellas collapsed in the corner like a decaying witch and an ancient set of stuffed elephants' feet. These dozen or so dusty monoliths had a special poignancy, all that remained of some solitary herd slaughtered for its ivory a century earlier. I visualized them displayed secretly around my sitting room, filling the air with their invisible but dignified presences.

Inside the shop a young woman attendant sat behind a marquetry desk, watching me with her head tilted to one side as if calculating in a patient way how serious a customer I might be. This unprofessional pose, and her total lack of response as I entered the shop, ought to have warned me off, but already I had been struck by the young woman's unusual appearance.

What I first noticed, transforming the dingy interior of the shop, was the magnificence of her brocaded gown, far beyond the means of a sales girl at this dowdy end of the King's Road. Against a lustrous blue field, a cerulean of almost Pacific deepness, the gold and silver patterning rose from the floor at her feet, so rich that I almost expected the gown to surge up and engulf her. By comparison, her demure head and shoulders, white bust discreetly revealed by the low bodice, emerged with an extraordinary serenity from this resplendent sea, like those of a domestic Aphrodite seated calmly astride Poseidon. Although she was barely beyond her teens, her hair had been dressed in a deliberately unfashionable style, as if lovingly assembled by an elderly devotee of twenties' film magazines. Within this blonde helmet her features had been rouged and powdered with the same lavish care, eyebrows plucked and hairline raised, without any sense of pastiche or mock nostalgia, perhaps by an eccentric mother still dreaming of Valentino.

Her small hands rested on her lap, apparently clasped together but in fact separated by a narrow interval, a stylized pose that suggested she was trying to hold to her some moment of time that might otherwise slip away. On her mouth hung a faint smile, at once pensive and reassuring, as if she had resigned herself in the most adult way to the vanishing world of this moribund curio shop.

'I'm sorry to see you're closing down,' I remarked to her. 'That set of elephants' feet in the window . . . there's something rather touching about them.'

She made no reply. Her hands remained clasped their millimetres apart, and her eyes stared in their trance-like way at the door I had closed behind me. She was sitting on a peculiarly designed chair, a three-legged contraption of varnished teak that was part stand and part artist's easel.

Realizing that it was some sort of surgical device and that she was probably a cripple – hence the elaborate make-up and frozen posture – I bent down to speak to her again.

Then I saw the brass plaque fastened to the apex of the teak tripod on which she sat.

SERENA COCKAYNE

Attached to the plaque was a dusty price ticket. '£250'.

In retrospect, it is curious that it took me so long to realize that I was looking, not at a real young woman, but at an elaborate mannequin, a masterpiece of the doll-maker's art produced by a remarkable virtuoso. This at last made sense of her Edwardian gown and antique wig, the twenties' cosmetics and facial expression. None the less, the resemblance to a real woman was uncanny. The slightly bowed contours of the shoulders, the too-pearly and unblemished skin, the few strands of hair at the nape of the neck that had escaped the wig-maker's attentions, the uncanny delicacy with which the nostrils, ears and lips had been modelled – almost by an act of sexual love – together these represented a *tour de force* so breathtaking that it all but concealed the subtle wit of the whole enterprise. Already I was thinking of the impact this life-size replica of themselves would have on the wives of my friends when I first introduced them to it.

A curtain behind me was drawn back. The owner of the shop, an adroit young homosexual, came forward with a white cat in his arms, chin raised at the sound of my delighted laughter. Already I had taken out my chequebook and had scribbled my signature with a flourish befitting the occasion.

So I carried Serena Cockayne to a taxi and brought her home to live with me. Looking back at that first summer we spent together I remember it as a time of perpetual good humour, in which almost every aspect of my life was enriched by Serena's presence. Decorous and unobtrusive, she touched everything around me with the most delicious ironies. Sitting quietly by the fireplace in my study as I read, presiding like the mistress of the house over the dining table, her placid smile and serene gaze illuminated the air.

Not one of my friends failed to be taken in by the illusion, and all complimented me on bringing off such a coup. Their wives, of course, regarded Serena with suspicion, and clearly considered her to be part of some adolescent or sexist prank. However, I kept a straight face, and within a few months her presence in my house was taken for granted by all of us.

Indeed, by the autumn she was so much a part of my life that I often failed to notice her at all. Soon after her arrival I had discarded the heavy teak stand and substituted a small gilt chair on which I could carry her comfortably from room to room. Serena was remarkably light. Her inventor – this unknown genius of the doll-maker's art – had clearly inserted a substantial armature, for her posture, like her expression, never changed. Nowhere was there any indication of her date or place of manufacture, but from the scuffed patent-leather shoes that sometimes

protruded below the brocade gown I guessed that she had been assembled some twenty years earlier, possibly as an actress's double during the great days of the post-war film industry. By the time I returned to the shop to inquire about her previous owners the entire World's End had been reduced to rubble.

One Sunday evening in November I learned rather more about Serena Cockayne. After working all afternoon in the study I looked up from my desk to see her sitting in the corner with her back to me. Distracted by a professional problem, I had left her there after lunch without thinking, and there was something rather melancholy about her rounded shoulders and inclined head, almost as if she had fallen from favour.

As I turned her towards me I noticed a small blemish on her left shoulder, perhaps a fleck of plaster from the ceiling. I tried to brush it away, but the discoloration remained. It occurred to me that the synthetic skin, probably made from some early experimental plastic, might have begun to deteriorate. Switching on a table-lamp, I examined Serena's shoulders more carefully.

Seen against the dark background of the study, the down-like nimbus that covered Serena's skin confirmed all my admiration of her maker's genius. Here and there a barely detectable unevenness, the thinnest mottling to suggest a surface capillary, rooted the illusion in the firmest realism. I had always assumed that this masterpiece of imitation flesh extended no more than two inches or so below the shoulder line of the gown, and that the rest of Serena's body consisted of wood and papier mâché.

Looking down at the angular planes of her shoulder blades, at the modest curvatures of her well-concealed breasts, I gave way to a sudden and wholly unprurient impulse. Standing behind her, I took the silver zip in my fingers and with a single movement lowered it to Serena's waist.

As I gazed at the unbroken expanse of white skin that extended to a pair of plump hips and the unmistakable hemispheres of her buttocks I realized that the manikin before me was that of a complete woman, and that its creator had lavished as much skill and art on those never-to-be-seen portions of her anatomy as on the visible ones.

The zip had stuck at the lower terminus of its oxidized track. There was something offensive about my struggling with the loosened dress of this half-naked woman. My fingers touched the skin in the small of her back, removing the dust that had accumulated over the years.

Running diagonally from spine to hip was the hairline of a substantial scar. I took it for granted that this marked an essential vent required in the construction of these models. But the rows of opposing stitch-marks were all too obvious. I stood up, and for a few moments watched this partly disrobed woman with her inclined head and clasped hands, gazing placidly at the fireplace.

Careful not to damage her, I loosened the bodice of the gown. The upper

curvatures of her breasts appeared, indented by the shoulder straps. Then I saw, an inch above the still-concealed left nipple, a large black mole.

I zipped up the gown and straightened it gently on her shoulders. Kneeling on the carpet in front of her, I looked closely into Serena's face, seeing the faint fissures at the apex of her mouth, the minute veins in her cheek, a childhood scar below her chin. A curious sense of revulsion and excitement came over me, as if I had taken part in a cannibalistic activity.

I knew now that the person seated on her gilt chair was no mannequin but a once living woman, her peerless skin mounted and forever preserved by a master, not of the dollmaker's, but of the taxidermist's art.

At that moment I fell deeply in love with Serena Cockayne.

During the next month my infatuation with Serena had all the intensity of which a middle-aged man is capable. I abandoned my office, leaving the staff to cope for themselves, and spent all my time with Serena, tending her like the most dutiful lover. At huge expense I had a complex air-conditioning system installed in my house, of a type only employed in art museums. In the past I had moved Serena from warm room to cool without a thought to her complexion, assuming it to be made of some insensitive plastic, but I now carefully regulated the temperature and humidity, determined to preserve her forever. I rearranged the furniture throughout the house to avoid bruising her arms and shoulders as I carried her from floor to floor. In the mornings I would wake eagerly to find her at the foot of my bed, then seat her by me at the breakfast table. All day she stayed within my reach, smiling at me with an expression that almost convinced me she responded to my feelings.

My social life I gave up altogether, discontinuing my dinner parties and seeing few friends. One or two callers I admitted, but only to allay their suspicions. During our brief and meaningless conversations I would watch Serena across the sitting room with all the excitement that an illicit affair can produce.

Christmas we celebrated alone. Given Serena's youth – at times when I caught her gazing across the room after some stray thought she seemed little more than a child – I decided to decorate the house for her in the traditional style, with a spangled tree, holly, streamers and mistletoe. Gradually I transformed the rooms into a series of arbours, from which she presided over our festivities like the madonna of a procession of altar-pieces.

At midnight on Christmas Eve I placed her in the centre of the sitting room, and laid my presents at her feet. For a moment her hands seemed almost to touch, as if applauding my efforts. Bending below the mistletoe above her head, I brought my lips to within that same distance from hers that separated her hands.

To all this care and devotion Serena responded like a bride. Her slim face, once so naive with its tentative smile, relaxed into the contented

pose of a fulfilled young wife. After the New Year I decided to bring us out into the world again, and held the first of a few small dinner parties. My friends were glad to see us in such good humour, accepting Serena as one of themselves. I returned to my office and worked happily through the day until I set off for home, where Serena would unfailingly wait for me with the warm regard of a proud and devoted wife.

While dressing for one of these dinner parties it occurred to me that Serena alone of us was unable to change her costume. Unhappily the first signs of an excess domesticity were beginning to show themselves in a slight casualness of her personal grooming. The once elaborate coiffure had become unsettled, and the stray blonde hairs all too obviously caught the light. In the same way the immaculate make-up of her face now showed the first signs of wear and tear.

Thinking it over, I decided to call on the services of a nearby hairdressing and beauty salon. When I telephoned them they agreed instantly to send a member of their staff to my house.

And here my troubles began. The one emotion of which I had never suspected myself, and which I had never before felt for any human being, coiled around my heart.

The young man who arrived, bringing with him a miniature pantechnicon of equipment, seemed harmless enough. Although with a swarthy and powerful physique, there was something effeminate about him, and there was clearly no danger in leaving him alone with Serena.

For all his self-assurance, he seemed surprised when I first introduced him to Serena, his suave 'Good morning, madam . . .' ending in a mumble. Shivering in the cool air, he gazed at her open-mouthed, clearly stunned by her beauty and calm repose. I left him to get on with it and spent the next hour working in my study, distracted now and then by a few bars from *The Barber of Seville* and *My Fair Lady* that sounded down the stairs. When he had finished I inspected his work, delighted to see that he had restored every breath of her first glory to Serena. The over-domesticated housewife had vanished, and in her place was the naive Aphrodite I had first seen in the curio shop six months earlier.

So pleased was I that I decided to call on the young man's services again, and his visits became a weekly event. Thanks to his attentions, and my own devotion to the temperature and humidity controls, Serena's complexion regained all its perfection. Even my guests commented on the remarkable bloom of her appearance. Deeply contented, I looked forward to the coming spring and the celebration of our first anniversary.

Six weeks later, while the young hairdresser was at work in Serena's sitting room upstairs, I happened to return to my bedroom to collect a book. I could clearly hear the young man's voice, at a low pitch as if communicating some private message. I glanced through the open door. He was kneeling in front of Serena, his back to me, cosmetic

pallet in one hand and paint stick in the other, gesticulating with them in a playful and mock-comical manner. Illuminated by his handiwork, Serena gazed straight into his face, her freshly painted lips almost moist with anticipation. Unmistakably, the young man was murmuring a discreet and private endearment.

During the following days I felt that my head had been seized by some kind of vice. As I tried helplessly to master the pain of that first intense jealousy, I was forced to realize that the young man was Serena's age, and that she would always have more in common with him than with me. Superficially our life continued as before – we sat together in the study when I returned from the office, I would carry Serena into the sitting room when my friends called, and she would join us at the dining table – but I was aware that a formal note had entered our relationship. No more did Serena pass the night in my bedroom, and I noticed that for all her calm smile I no longer caught her eye as I used to.

Despite my mounting suspicions, the young hairdresser continued to make his calls. Whatever crisis through which Serena and I were passing, I was determined not to give in. During the long hour of his visits I had to fight through every second to prevent myself from rushing up the staircase. From the hall I could often hear his voice murmuring in that insinuating tone, louder now as if he were trying to incite me. When he left I could sense his contempt.

It would take me an hour before I could walk slowly up the stairs to Serena's room. Her extraordinary beauty, relit by the taper of the young man's flattery, made my anger all the greater. Unable to speak, I would pace around her like a doomed husband, aware of the subtle changes to Serena's face. Although in every way more youthful, reminding me painfully of the thirty years that separated us, her expression after each visit became fractionally less naive, like that of a young wife contemplating her first affair. A sophisticated wave now modulated the curve of blonde hair that crossed her right temple. Her lips were slimmer, her mouth stronger and more mature.

Inevitably I began an affair with another woman, the separated wife of a close friend, but I made certain that Serena knew nothing of this or of the other infidelities that followed during the next weeks. Also, pathetically, I began to drink, and in the afternoons would sit around drunkenly in my friends' empty apartments, holding long imaginary conversations with Serena in which I was both abject and aggressive. At home I began to play the dictatorial husband, leaving her all evening in her room upstairs and moodily refusing to talk to her at the dining table. All the while, through paralysed eyes I watched the young hairdresser come and go, an insolent suitor whistling as he sauntered up the stairs.

After the last of his visits came the weary denouement. I had spent the afternoon drinking alone in a deserted restaurant, watched by the patient staff. In the taxi home I had a sudden confused revelation about Serena and myself. I realized that our breakdown had been entirely my fault, that

my jealousy of her harmless flirtation with the young man had magnified everything to absurd proportions.

Released from weeks of agony by this decision, I paid off the taxi at my door, let myself into the cool air of the house and rushed upstairs. Dishevelled but happy, I walked towards Serena as she sat quietly in the centre of her sitting room ready to embrace her and forgive us both.

Then I noticed that for all her immaculate make-up and extravagant hair her brocade gown hung strangely from her shoulders. The right strap exposed the whole of her collar-bone, and the bodice had slipped forward as if someone had been fumbling with her breast. Her smile still hovered on her lips, calling on me in the most kindly way to resign myself to the realities of adult life.

Angrily I stepped forward and slapped her face.

How I regret that senseless spasm. In the two years that have passed I have had ample time to reflect on the dangers of an over-hasty catharsis. Serena and I still live together, but all is over between us. She sits on her gilt chair by the sitting-room fireplace and joins me at the dining table when I entertain my friends. But the outward show of our relationship is nothing more than the dried husk from which the body of feeling has vanished.

At first, after that blow to her face, little seemed to change. I remember standing in that room upstairs with my bruised hand. I calmed myself, brushed the face powder from my knuckles and decided to review my life. From then on I stopped drinking and went to the office each day, devoting myself to my work.

For Serena, however, the incident marked the first stage in what proved to be a decisive transformation. Within a few days I realized that she had lost something of her bloom. Her face became drawn, her nose more protuberant. The corner of her mouth where I had struck her soon became puffy and took on a kind of ironic downward twist. In the absence of the young hairdresser – whom I had sacked within ten minutes of striking her – Serena's decline seemed to accelerate. The elaborate coiffure which the young man had foisted upon her soon became undone, the straggling hairs falling on her shoulders.

By the end of our second year together Serena Cockayne had aged a full decade. At times, looking at her hunched on her gilt chair in the still brilliant gown, I almost believed that she had set out to catch and overtake me as part of some complex scheme of revenge. Her posture had slumped, and her rounded shoulders gave her the premature stoop of an old woman. With her unfocused smile and straggling hair she often reminded me of a tired and middle-aged spinster. Her hands had at last come together, clasped in a protective and wistful way.

Recently a far more disquieting development has taken place. Three years after our first meeting Serena entered upon a radically new stage of deterioration. As a result of some inherent spinal weakness, perhaps

associated with the operation whose scars cross the small of her back, Serena's posture has altered. In the past she leaned forward slightly, but three days ago I found that she had slumped back in her chair. She sits there now in a stiff and awkward way, surveying the world with a critical and unbalanced eye, like some dotty faded beauty. One eyelid has partly closed, and gives her ashen face an almost cadaverous look. Her hands have continued on their slow collision, and have begun to twist upon each other, rotating to produce a deformed parody of themselves that will soon become an obscene gesture.

Above all, it is her smile that terrifies me. The sight of it has unsettled my entire life, but I find it impossible to move my eyes from it. As her face has sagged, the smile has become wider and even more askew. Although it has taken two years to achieve its full effect, that blow to her mouth has turned it into a reproachful grimace. There is something knowing and implacable about Serena's smile. As I look at it now across the study it seems to contain a complete understanding of my character, a judgment unknown to me from which I can never escape.

Each day the smile creeps a little further across her face. Its progress is erratic, revealing aspects of her contempt for me that leave me numb and speechless. It is cold here, as the low temperature helps to preserve Serena. By turning on the heating system I could probably dispose of her in a few weeks, but this I can never do. That smirk of hers alone prevents me. Besides, I am completely bound to Serena.

Fortunately, Serena is now ageing faster than I am. Helplessly watching her smile, my overcoat around my shoulders, I wait for her to die and set me free.

1976

THE ULTIMATE CITY

All winter, while he worked on the sailplane, Halloway had never been certain what drove him to build this dangerous aircraft, with its ungainly wings and humpback fuselage. Even now, as he crouched in the cockpit during the final seconds before his first flight, he was still unsure why he was perched on the steep cliffs above the Sound, waiting to be catapulted into the overlit water. The tapered wings shivered in the cold air, as if the aircraft were trying to rip open the cockpit and eject its foolhardy pilot on to the beach below.

It had taken since dawn for Halloway and his helpers – the crowd of ten-year-olds who formed an enthusiastic claque and coolie-gang – to drag the sailplane from the barn behind his grandfather's house and secure it to the catapult. By the time they reached the cliffs the other contestants in the gliding championship had been aloft for hours. From his cockpit Halloway could see a dozen of the brightly painted craft hanging above his head in the calm sky.

On the ground, by contrast, the turbulent air sweeping up the face of the cliffs seemed to have broken loose from a tornado. Exhausted by the effort of carrying the glider, the boys hung limply from the wings like a line of ballast bags. At any moment a sudden gust would sweep them all into the air together.

In front of Halloway were thirty feet of miniature railway-track and the steel cable linking the sailplane to the sand-filled trolley at the edge of the cliff which would either pull the craft apart or, with luck, catapult it into the air. Halloway signalled the boys aside, and gripped the catapult release lever in both hands. Once again he reminded himself that the Wright Brothers' first sustained flights, little more than a hundred years earlier, had also been launched by catapult.

'Thanks, everybody – now stand back!' he shouted above the wind. One of the smallest boys was still clinging absent-mindedly to the port wing-tip. 'Jamie, let go, for God's sake! *Take off!*'

As the trolley lurched forward, dragging the sailplane after it like a startled bird, Halloway felt the sudden strength of the huge wings and knew already that the aircraft would be the most successful of all those his father had designed before his death. At the edge of the cliffs the trolley hurtled down its track. Halloway released the towing cable, and the glider rose steeply, carried upwards by a cold hand, almost falling on to its back in the rush of wind. The dunes and the beach reeled away to starboard,

taking the world from him. The cheers of the spectators were lost in the shrill soughing of the slipstream.

Thirty seconds later, Halloway had climbed a turbulent staircase that carried him in a right-hand spiral to a height of a thousand feet. Abruptly everything around him had become quiet. Little more than a whisper, the wind sucked softly at the fabric of the glider. The heat from the sun stung his blond skin, but Halloway ignored the pain and trimmed the glider into a stable attitude. As always, his father's design had been without error. After the first yawing subsided he began to move the glider across the sky, almost feeling his father's presence in its powerful span. The sailplane soared like a condor in the thermals, dominating the other competitors now far below. Relaxed and happy now, Halloway sat back, ready to preside generously over his domain.

Halloway had begun to build the sailplanes two years earlier. After his parents' death he had moved to his grandfather's house, and for a long while had been reluctant to return to his old home. The charred remains of the sauna where his mother and father had died lay untouched below the derelict sail of the solar energy rig. The hundreds of occluded mirrors, fused by the intense heat of the fire, towered fifty feet above the calcinated roof tiles, an all too melancholy memorial.

One evening, while discussing the annual gliding competition, which the residents of Garden City organized in order to let a little civilized rivalry into their pastoral lives, his grandmother mentioned that Halloway's father had been a keen amateur pilot during the last days of powered aviation. On an impulse Halloway borrowed the keys to the house and wandered through the gutted rooms. Only the studio and workshop, separated from the house by an arm of the canal which irrigated his parents' market garden, had escaped the fire. The shelves were filled with relics of his father's restless mind – antique gear-boxes and carburettors, mementoes of the vanished petroleum age, and the designs for a series of progressively more ambitious sailplanes. The half-completed skeleton of a small glider still lay on its trestles in the workshop.

Halloway pored over the blueprints for months, intrigued by his father's casual but clear calligraphy. The marginal jottings formed a running diary of the rich inner life of this endlessly inventive man, by a bitter irony killed beside his wife in his own home by the overloaded circuitry of an advanced solar device he had designed himself. Like some pastoral Leonardo, he had sat in his studio in the centre of this placid market garden. As the canals flowed between the greenhouses filled with flowers and vegetables, as the waterwheels turned and the hundreds of solar sails silently drained light from the sun, he had devised ever more complex tidal-energy pumps and solar batteries, refuse recycle units and windmills. His real passion, though, apart from his curious interest in old internal-combustion engines, was for these gliders.

All that first winter Halloway had examined the blueprints, feeling the

contours of his father's mind in these graceful airframes and wing designs. Several of the aircraft featured extensive control-surfaces, strengthened fuselage-members far in excess of any wing-loading they might need, almost as if they were designed to carry some secret cargo. But Halloway began with the most basic of the gliders. Fortunately, the art and practice of carpentry had reached an advanced level in Garden City. Where an earlier generation of teenage boy learned to strip a carburettor or re-set a distributor, the young of Garden City were expert by the age of twelve in joining and flitching and dovetailing. Within a month his group of eager assistants had helped him to build his first modest sailplane, ready in time for the summer's gliding championship.

As he urged them on, however, watching them cut and stitch the fabric, plane and polish the struts and stringers, Halloway had known already that the competition was only an excuse. He was driven by some other need, connected not so much with his father as with the metal relics, the superchargers embedded in lucite, the fuel pumps and speedometers that lay around the studio like the ornaments of a shrine dedicated to the vanished spirit of the Otto Cycle.

Long before he became a skilled pilot, Halloway had been able to outfly his rivals, as much by pure aggression as by airmanship. None of the other competitors would rise to his baiting, let alone put up a fight. Although the championships were the climax of the year's flying, the other pilots were happy to award him the prize. When he banked and dived towards the beach, chasing the faster thermals behind the dunes, the two gliders he forced aside made way for him without complaint. Their pilots, a thirty-five-year-old architect whom Halloway was always beating at tennis, and an elderly hydrographer with a red beard, had both visited the workshop to watch the construction of this huge glider, and warned him of the impossibility of launching such a craft.

Both had been suitably impressed by Halloway's catapult. They were clearly glad to see Halloway succeed – too glad, in fact. If they had not been so naturally lacking in deceit they might have questioned his motives for building this elaborate craft – not that he would have been able to answer them – but Halloway's blond hair and guileless blue eyes turned aside any suspicion. Eager for action at all costs, yet shy and very much the dreamer, Halloway had a natural talent for rallying people around him.

At the same time, he liked to provoke the crowd. Looking down at the spectators with their picnic hampers among the dunes, the officials gazing at the sky from their canvas chairs, Halloway imagined himself as a World War II fighter ace, diving out of the sun and raking these amiable neighbours with bursts of machine-gun fire. The whole bucolic landscape of Garden City, this elegant but toy-like world of solar sails and flower-filled gardens, the serene windmills and gently nodding reduction gear of the tidal-power machines – all these cried out for a Pearl Harbor.

Surprised by this strain of aggression in himself, Halloway checked

his temper. Most of the three hundred spectators he had known since childhood, intelligent, civilized and kindly people who had done their best to care for him since his parents' death, and enjoyed being shocked by his desperado stunts.

They were all watching him now, hands shielding their eyes from the sun. The coolie-gang of small boys squatted on the catapult rails, obviously waiting for Halloway to astonish them.

A mile away, across the Sound, the steep concrete walls of an artificial island rose from the sea like the hull of a cruise liner. The island was a former naval station, a collection of rusting metal buildings around a lighthouse. Although little more than swimming distance away, Halloway had noticed that few people in Garden City were aware of the island, as if they mentally assigned it to the tower blocks of the old metropolis on the opposite shore of the Sound. The previous summer Halloway had rowed out to the island, winding through the dangerous labyrinth of tidal power pontoons and rocker arms that separated the beach from the sea. In the pump-room below the lighthouse he found the huge diesel engines that once powered the warning beacon, each the size of a steam locomotive.

But even his surprise at the enormous latent power of these metal beasts paled before his first real sight of the city. He stood on the rusting catwalk, hands gripping the rail to stop himself from diving into the cold waters of the Sound and setting off to the far shore. The vast office-blocks, many over a hundred storeys high, formed a silent congregation, more remote and yet closer to him than ever before.

Below him, as the glider climbed the thermals, the first people in the crowd were standing up among their picnic hampers, the officials waving their chequered flags at Halloway. Already they had guessed that he intended to circle the lighthouse. Halloway climbed away from them, making use of the strong updraughts that rose from the heated greenhouses, solar reflectors and rooftops, the warm canals and clay tennis-courts. Already he was looking down, not only at the naval island, but at the distant towers of the city.

When Halloway reached the naval island half an hour later the shoreline of Garden City was far behind him, the lines of solar reflectors forming strips of metallic glitter. He had meant to impress everyone by making a few circuits of the lighthouse before returning, but as he soared above the water he could feel the wind carrying him further across the Sound. At any moment it would be too late to turn back. He waited for the glider to bank to port or starboard, but the sailplane pressed on across the deep water. Already Halloway could see the canyons opening among the office-blocks of the city, an abandoned dream waiting to be re-occupied. Shadow and sunlight alternated between the buildings, as if flashing some kind of cryptic message to him. But Halloway knew that he had made his decision, and why all winter he had been building this strange aircraft.

* * *

Borne along by the fronts of warm air, Halloway and his glider made their transit of the Sound. The opposing shorelines had begun to converge, and little more than three miles of water separated the beach communities from the deserted quays and motor-routes of the city suburbs. Exhilarated in a way he had never known before, Halloway gripped the control stick with his knees, and stretched out his arms to seize the vivid air. He was not alone in the sky. On all sides flights of wild birds were crossing the Sound – pintails and white-fronted geese, mallard and harlequin duck. A colony of herring gulls moved below him, changing course when they passed Halloway as if guiding him through the crowded air. No longer hunted by the vegetarian inhabitants of Garden City, immense congregations of water birds thrived around the uninhabited shores of the Sound, in the mud-flats, lagoons and sloughs between the market settlements and the old metropolis.

Ahead of him, across the mercury surface of the sea, a collapsed suspension bridge lay like a drowned saurian in the gateway of the Sound. The last of the market gardens gave way to uncultivated scrubland. The canals petered out among the sand-hills. Ten miles from the city, by some unwritten rule, as if they were aware that the physical spell of the metropolis might still intimidate them, the last inhabitants to leave their factories, offices and apartment houses had marked out a no-man's-land to separate themselves from their pasts. Halloway remembered his grandfather's lurid account (the old man was only too keen to be tricked into these reminiscences) of how the city, like a thousand others around the globe, had gradually come to a halt and shut itself down for ever. When the world's reserves of fossil fuels had finally been exhausted, when the last coal silos were empty and the last oil-tankers had berthed, the power-stations and railway systems, production lines and steel-works had closed for the last time and the post-technological era had begun.

By then, twenty-five years earlier, there had been few people left anyway. By some unconscious perception of their own extinction, the huge urban populations of the late twentieth century had dwindled during the previous decades. Halloway's parents had been among the last to leave, abandoning their apartment – the only one still occupied – in one of the high-rise blocks that Halloway could see now emerging from the haze beyond the ruined suspension bridge. Perhaps it was this long-postponed departure that had separated his father from the other inhabitants of Garden City. The small but determined parties of colonists – doctors, chemists, agronomists and engineers – had set out into the rural backwaters determined to build the first scientifically advanced agrarian society. Within a generation they, like countless similar communities around other major cities, had successfully built their pastoral paradise, in a shot-gun marriage of Arcadia and advanced technology. Here each home was equipped with recycling and solar-energy devices, set in its own five acres of intensely cultivated market garden, a self-supporting

agricultural paradise linked to its neighbours by a network of canals and conduits, the whole irrigated landscape heated and cooled, powered and propelled by a technology far more sophisticated in every respect than that of the city they had abandoned, but a technology applied to the waterwheel, the tidal pump and the bicycle.

He had reached the western limits of the Sound. A thousand feet below was the broken back of the bridge. Halloway circled a large ceramics works on the southern shore, letting the hot air reflected from the roof-tiles lift him as high as possible before he made the crossing to the city. The downtown office-blocks and apartment-houses were still nearly ten miles away, but facing him across the bridge was a built-up area of dockyards, suburban department stores, car parks and motor-route intersections. Moored to the quays were line upon line of rusting freighters and oil-tankers, their hulls like husks.

For the first time, as he steered the glider across the bridge, Halloway could see the cars, hundreds of the dusty vehicles lining the quaysides, parked in the empty side-streets on flattened tyres. Immense roads ran everywhere, causeways of steel and concrete that moved like some kind of serpentine sculpture through complex interchanges. Traces of these broad decks, never less than six lanes wide, were still to be found in Garden City – on an intact half-mile section behind his grandfather's house the inhabitants staged their annual bicycle rally.

Needless to say, there were no cars in Garden City. If there had been, Halloway often thought with a kind of blank bitterness, his mother and father would still be alive. Despite their severe burns, they might still have been saved by the intensive-care unit at the hospital three miles away. The fastest transport available had been the village fire-appliance. This brilliantly designed land-yacht, fitted with the most efficient system of metal sails ever devised, and with an advanced magnetic suspension invented by a local electrical engineer, achieved a top speed of six miles an hour. By the time they reached the hospital, their distraught son tearing at the aluminium sails in a frenzy, the Halloways were already in deep shock and died the next day.

As he crossed the ruined bridge, losing height in the cold air over the water, Halloway counted the cars in the parking lots along the quays. Scores had been abandoned on the bridge approach-roads when their owners set out on foot. The salt air had stripped away their roofs and body panels, exposing the engines and steering gear. Halloway had seen automobile engines before, in the encyclopaedias of industrial archaeology at the village school. Once, as a boy of ten, he had entered his father's workshop and found him running an old gasolene engine. The violent but controlled noise, the juddering motion that shook the work-bench and timber walls, and the heady fumes like a black gas – an intoxicating smell at once dirty and exhilarating – had almost knocked him off his

feet. What he remembered above all, before his father switched off the engine and crated it away for the last time, was the overwhelming energy of this machine, the power and excitement beyond anything else in their sophisticated Arcadia. And yet, as his father told him, this was no more than the power unit of a small lawnmower.

Not that there was any taboo against gasolene engines, nor for that matter against oil- or coal-fired steam engines. There was merely a tacit understanding that for two hundred years proto-industrial man had pillaged the earth's natural resources, and these relics were unwelcome reminders of an unhappy history. Beyond this were boredom and indifference – the inhabitants of Garden City were aware that their technology, their advanced horticulture and their casual winning of energy from the sun, the wind and the tides, had progressed far ahead of anything the age of oil and coal had achieved, with its protein-hungry populations, its limitless pollution of air, soil and sea.

By the time it reached the opposite shore the sailplane was barely three hundred feet above the metal-strewn water. The ragged edge of the eight-lane roadway passed below Halloway, the lines of cars forming bowers of rust from which a few sea-flowers flashed their blooms. Huge numbers of pigeons had taken over the silent city, and Halloway could almost believe that he had entered a vast bird-sanctuary. Thousands of starlings clustered among the seats of a deserted sports stadium. Generations of thrush and blackbird had nested on office window-sills and in the seats of open cars. Halloway had to bank sharply to avoid a pair of swans struggling to gain height above a row of dockyard cranes.

Barely clearing a warehouse roof, the glider rose again in the warm air lifting from the hot concrete of the roads and parking lots. A maze of telegraph wires straggled across the quay-side streets. Halloway flew on above the rusting customs sheds, and crossed the tidal basin of a silted-up dockyard, where a boom of freighters sat in a few feet of water. Beyond a silent railroad station, where ranks of trains stood in waist-high grass, he approached the outskirts of an urban centre, one of a dozen satellite cities on the perimeter of the metropolis. Everywhere there were stores filled with domestic appliances, furniture, clothing and kitchenware, a glut of merchandise that Halloway had never anticipated. In Garden City there were few stores – everything one needed, whether a new solar-powered kitchen stove or a high-speed bicycle, was ordered direct from the craftsman who designed and built it to one's exact needs. In Garden City everything was so well made that it lasted for ever.

Following the main arterial highway which led towards the next satellite city, Halloway crossed an area of tract housing and single-storey factories. In the open fields a local manufacturer had dumped what appeared to be a lifetime's output of washing machines. Line upon line of the white and chromium cabinets stood in the sunlight. Warm air rose from this field

of metal, carrying the glider high above the concrete embankments of a cloverleaf.

Directly in front of Halloway there was a flash of light in the glassy face of a fifteen-storey office building. Out of this sunburst huge wings moved in the bright air. A powerful aircraft, with a wing-span as large as his own sailplane's, soared straight towards him. In panic, Halloway plunged the glider into a steep turn, cursing himself for entering the air-space of the city, with its empty towers guarded by aerial demons. As the glider banked across the face of the office building his opponent also turned. His long wings, built to the same plan as Halloway's, were raised in a defensive gesture. A hundred feet apart, they soared together along the curtain-walling, the pilot's white face staring at Halloway in obvious alarm.

Without warning, this timid intruder vanished as suddenly as he had appeared. Turning back, Halloway circled the streets around the office block, searching for any sign of the rival sailplane. Then, as he passed the office block with its mirror-glass curtain-wall, he realized that he had been frightened by nothing more than his own reflection.

Delighted now, Halloway soared to and fro across the face of the building, playing the fool and happy to mimic himself, wingtip little more than ten feet from the curtain-walling. He waved at his reflection, holding the control stick with his knees, proud of his skill and glad to be able to show off to himself. He rose above the building on the strong currents lifting from the metal roofs of the cars, and then plunged towards himself in a 100-m.p.h. dive, swerving away at the last moment, wingtip punching out a section of the mirror.

'*Olé* . . . !'

His shout of glee was lost in the splintering glass. On his third dive, as he plummeted downwards, he no longer cared when a gust of wind drove him laterally across the streets in a storm of cigarette packs. Out of control, the sailplane was hurled against the curtain-walling, knocking out a dozen windows. Colliding with his own image, Halloway fell with the broken machine among the cars a hundred feet below.

An hour later, Halloway left the crashed glider lying at the base of this huge rectilinear mirror and set off towards the towers of the city five miles away to the south-west.

Protected by the buckling wings, the cockpit of the glider had fallen among the vehicles parked outside the entrance to the office block. Hanging upside-down in the harness, Halloway punched out the fractured canopy, released his straps and lowered himself on to the roof of a green sedan.

Too shocked to do more than glance numbly at the face of the building which had dashed him from the air, Halloway had climbed across the splintered wings of the glider. Picking a car at random, he lay down in the rear seat. In this warm, stale air, almost unchanged for thirty years,

he rested quietly, massaging his bruised chest and shoulders. The domed cabin of the car, with its softly sprung seats and antique contours, its raw metal functionalism, was a fitting womb to guard his passage from the open transits of the sky to the hard and immobile concrete now surrounding him on all sides.

Already, though, when he stepped from the car after an hour's rest, Halloway was coming to terms with the scale and character of the cityscape into which he had fallen. Display signs proliferated everywhere like some voracious metal flora, untrimmed and uncontrolled. The crudeness of the asphalt and concrete streets compared with the tiled and flower-decked pathways of Garden City, the elemental technology of power cables and ventilation shafts, had all the anarchic strength of a proto-industrial society, closer to the massive cantilever bridges and steam engines of the great Victorians than to Halloway's image of the Twentieth Century.

A mile to the north-east a line of rusting cranes marked the shoreline of the Sound. If he walked through the side-streets he could reach the ruined suspension bridge in less than an hour, cross the channel by swimming from one section to the next, and be home by evening.

Without thinking, Halloway turned his back on the shore, on the cranes and rusting freighters. For all their apparent menace, the cluster of skyscrapers offered more security to him than the pastoral world of Garden City with its kindly farmers and engineers. Somewhere among those tall buildings – on the topmost floor, he was certain – was the apartment in which his mother and father had lived. As for any worries that his grandparents might have for his safety, Halloway was sure that they, like the crowds on the beach, knew only too well where he had gone.

Halloway climbed over the broken-backed fuselage of the glider. He stared at the wreckage, thinking of the months he had spent building the craft. Lying here at the foot of this mirror it reminded him of the body of his father stretched out below the solar reflector in the burnt-out ruins of his house.

'Come on! Forget it, Halloway!' With a whoop, Halloway leapt over the tailplane and set off along the street. Shouting to himself, he ran in and out of the cars, pounding on the roofs with his fists. He was going home.

For the next two hours, as the sun drifted across the Sound, Halloway pressed on down the long avenues that carried him, block after block, into the heart of the metropolis. The office-buildings and apartment-houses grew larger, but the centre of the city remained as distant as ever. But Halloway was in no hurry, far more interested in the sights around him. His first feelings of nervousness had gone. Curiosity devouring everything, he ran past the cars that sat on flattened tyres in the roadway, skipping from one side of the avenue to the other when something caught his eye. Many of the stores, bars and offices were unlocked. In a hairdressing salon – an Aladdin's cave of chromium gadgetry, mirrors, thousands

of coloured bottles – he sat in the rotating chairs, and tried on a succession of wigs, grimacing at himself in the dusty mirrors. In an empty department-store he lost himself in a maze of furnished rooms, each like a stage-set, decorated in the styles of nearly half a century earlier. The synthetic curtain and carpet fabrics, with their elaborate patterns and lamé threads, were totally unlike the simple hand-woven worsteds and woollens of Garden City.

Halloway wandered around these darkened tableaux, these ghosts of bedroom suites and dining-rooms. He lay back grandly on an ornate four-poster, stroking the deep pile of the bedspread. What amused him, above all, was the feel of this vanished world, a surprise more tactile than visual.

In the dim light of a men's-wear department he pulled clothes racks on to the counters, jerked open the cabinet drawers. A cornucopia of suits and shirts, shoes and hats spilled across the floor. Stripping off his woollen trousers and jerkin, like the uniform of an ignorant medieval churl, he selected a new costume – red-white-and-blue sneakers, yellow suede trousers and a fleece-lined jacket with silver-thread embroidery and leather tassels as long as his arm.

In this modest attire he swung happily along the avenue. Thousands of cars lined the streets, their flamboyant bodywork covered with moss. Wild flowers peeped from the radiator grilles. Halloway stopped at every tenth car and tried to start the engine. Sitting behind these dead controls, he remembered the car he had found buried in the dunes at Garden City. The roof and doors had rusted away, but he sat for hours behind the wheel of this drowned hulk. By contrast, the cars here had barely been touched by the weather. Under the moss and dirt the lurid paint was as bright as ever.

Halloway was disappointed that none would start. Rocking a black limousine that took his fancy in an automobile showroom, he could hear the fuel still swishing in its tank.

'Somewhere, Halloway,' he told himself aloud, 'you'll find a car that runs. I've decided you're going to arrive in style . . .'

At dusk, as Halloway passed a park filled with wild trees, shrubs and flowers of every kind, he realized that someone was following him. The soft tap of feet, sometimes barely moving, then running obliquely behind him, sounded faintly through the dark air. Heart racing, Halloway crouched among the cars. Nothing moved across the street. He filled his lungs with air, and broke away with a burst of speed, darting in and out of the cars. He dived through the open door of an evacuation bus parked by a hotel entrance and watched from the rear seats.

Five minutes later he saw the first of his shy pursuers. Edging forward cautiously, its eyes still on the park fifty yards away, a large deer hobbled along the sidewalk, searching the dim light for Halloway. Within moments two more appeared, steering their antlers through the overhead wires that trailed across the road.

As he watched them scenting the darkness, Halloway remembered the placid creatures in the zoo at Garden City, as lacking in aggression as these deer. The Angus and Hereford cows in their enclosure, the shire horses and saddleback pigs, the lambs, chicken and farmyard geese together memorialized all the vanished species of domestic animals. At Garden City everyone was vegetarian, not out of moral or religious conviction, but simply because they knew that the provision of grazing land, and the growing of cereal crops for animal feedstuffs, was a wastefully inefficient means of obtaining protein.

When the deer had gone, returning to their forest between the apartment blocks, Halloway stepped down from the bus. Knowing that he must spend the night somewhere, he walked up the steps into the hotel. On the seventh floor he found a bedroom from which he could see both the Sound and the skyscraper towers of the city centre. On the opposite shore the solar reflectors were still faintly visible, drinking in the last glow of the sunset, beacons of a vanished world. He slept through the night, dreaming of glass aeroplanes, their wings like mirrors, that circled the dark air over his head, waiting to carry him away to some sunlit eyrie among the clouds.

The next morning, after an early start, Halloway pressed on towards the city centre. He felt refreshed and confident again, fortified by an exotic breakfast of grapefruit juice, beans and peaches taken from the shelves of a nearby supermarket. Vaguely prudish about eating meat, he decided against opening any of the cans of pork and beef, the limitless varieties of salmon, tuna and sardine.

Bright sunlight filled the streets, picking out the vivid colours of the wild flowers growing in profusion from the cracked sidewalks. Despite these embellishments, the city's character had begun to change. Fastening his jacket across his chest, Halloway moved forward more cautiously. Above him, on all sides, were the massive structures and heavy technology of the late Twentieth Century – highway interchanges and bridge approaches, sixty-storey hotels and office-blocks. Between them, almost out of sight on the ground level, was a decaying under-stratum of bars and pintable arcades, nightclubs and clothing stores. The cheap façades and neon signs had long since collapsed into the roads. A maze of narrow side-streets ran off in all directions, but by following only the main avenues he soon lost his bearings. A wide road raised on concrete stilts carried him high into the air, and changed course in a series of giant loops. Plodding around this curving viaduct, a cambered deck eight lanes wide, Halloway wasted nearly an hour in returning to his starting point.

It was at this time, shortly after he left the cloverleaf by an emergency staircase, that Halloway came across the first of the strange monuments he was later to find all over the city. As he stepped down from the pedestrian exit, he noticed that a nearby parking lot had been used as a municipal dump. Old tyres, industrial waste and abandoned domestic appliances

lay about in a rusty moraine. Rising from its centre was a pyramid of television sets some sixty feet high, constructed with considerable care and an advanced sense of geometry. The thousand or so sets were aligned shoulder to shoulder, their screens facing outwards, the combinations of different models forming decorative patterns on the stepped sides. The whole structure, from base to apex, was invaded by wild elders, moss and firethorn, the clouds of berries forming a huge cascade.

Halloway stared up at the rows of television sets, a pyramid of dead eyes in their worm-riddled cabinets, like the eggs of some voracious reptile waiting to be born from the bland globes embedded in this matrix of rotting organic matter. Pulled apart by the elders, many of the sets revealed their internal wiring. The green and yellow circuitry, the blue capacitors and modulators, mingled with the bright berries of the firethorn, rival orders of a wayward nature merging again after millions of years of separate evolution.

Little more than half a mile away, in a plaza between two office buildings, Halloway found a second pyramid. From a distance it resembled a funeral pyre of metal scrap built from hundreds of typewriters, telex machines and duplicators taken from the offices around the plaza, a monument to the generations of clerks and typists who had worked there. A series of narrow terraces rose one above the other, the tiers of typewriters forming ingenious baroque columns. Brilliant climbing plants, lobster-clawed clematis and honeysuckle with pink and yellow flowers, entwined themselves around the metal colonnades, the vivid blooms illuminating this memorial of rust.

Halloway mounted a staircase of filing cabinets to the upper terrace of the pyramid. On all sides, in the nearby streets and on the raised pedestrian areas above the plaza, an extraordinary vegetation had taken root. Dahlias, marigolds and cosmos flourished among the cracked paving stones and in the ornamental urns outside the entrances to the office blocks. Along a three-hundred-yard section of the avenue all the cars had been cleared aside, and a field of poppies sprang from the broken asphalt. The bright, funeral flowers extended in a blood-red carpet down the line of hotels, as if waiting for a demonic visitor. Here and there an individual car had been picked out by this mysterious and profligate gardener, its windshield and windows knocked in and its cabin packed with blooms. As vivid as an explosion in a paint-shop, blue and carmine flowers and yellow-ribbed leaves crammed the open windows, mingled with tilting sunflowers and the vines that circled the roof and radiator grille.

From a side-street a quarter of a mile away came the sounds of collapsing masonry. Falling glass split the air. Halloway leapt down from the pyramid, holding to a column of typewriters as the road vibrated under his feet. The slow avalanche continued, the rumble of falling brickwork and the brittle ringing of breaking glass. Then Halloway heard the heavy beating of what he guessed was some kind of huge engine, throbbing with the

same rhythm as the motor he had watched his father running in his workshop years before. It moved away, breaking through some glass and masonry obstruction in its path. Already the first dust was billowing from the end of the street, lit by thousands of coloured petals.

Halloway climbed into a nearby car, waiting as this machine moved away. In the deserted city the noise of the assault had carried with it an unmistakable violence, as if some huge and ugly creature was venting its anger at random on the buildings around it.

'Halloway, time to go . . .' Already he had decided to leave the city and make his way home. Once he had crossed the river he would be safe.

When the streets were quiet again, and the cloud of petalled dust had drifted away down the avenue, Halloway set off, leaving the monument of typewriters and telex machines behind him. He ran silently through the field of poppies, as the last petals fell through the unsettled air around him.

When he reached the side-street he found the roadway littered with human figures. Masonry and broken glass, sections of store window as large as his sailplane's wings, lay among the crushed flowers. Most of the clothing stores that lined both sides of this narrow street had been attacked, their glass fronts and window displays ripped out by some giant implement.

Everywhere the plastic mannequins lay in the sunlight, limbs crushed by the tracks of the machine, polite expressions looking up from the glass and masonry.

Frightened for the first time by the sight of violence, Halloway ran towards the river, and by luck found the open span of a large road-bridge that carried him away from the city. Without pausing to look back, ears listening for any sound of the machine, he sprinted along in his coloured sneakers. Halfway across the bridge he slowed down for the first time to catch his breath. The cloud of petals was still drifting eastwards between the office blocks. Halloway searched the northern suburbs for the mirror-sheathed building into which he had crashed, regretting that he would have to leave the sailplane among these anonymous streets patrolled by this violent machine.

Angry with himself, he pulled off his fleece-lined jacket and hurled it over the balustrade. It fell into the dead water like a sad, brilliant bird. Already he looked forward to his return to Garden City, with its civilized people and sane behaviour. Thinking back, his aggressiveness at the gliding championships embarrassed him.

'. . . too eager for action at any cost,' he reproved himself as he strode along. 'In future check that, Halloway . . .'

He left the bridge and set off eastwards past the dockyards and warehouses. He had entered an area of single-storey factories and cheap housing, chemical tank-farms and electrical sub-stations. All around him, as well, were the monuments. He was crossing a plain of these memorials, pyramids of domestic appliances and car tyres, machine tools

and office furniture that had been erected on any available patch of waste ground. Ignoring them, and their ambiguous flowers, Halloway pressed on. Already he could see the collapsed suspension bridge that marked the gateway to the Sound.

Shortly before noon, when the river crossing was three miles behind him, Halloway came across the airport. As he approached the perimeter fence he could see the control tower, and the tails of parked airliners as high as three-storey buildings. The entire surface of the airport, the concrete runways and grass verges, was covered with thousands of automobiles. Variants of no more than two or three models, they stretched away in a huge metallized dream.

Curious to see the airliners, Halloway followed the perimeter fence towards the entrance. He guessed that the cars had been new models fresh from the production line, stored here by the manufacturers when the oil tap had been turned off. With luck, one of the cars might start for him.

Now that he had left the city, Halloway began to relax again. The airport was a zone that he found curiously reassuring, and in some obscure way made up for the loss of his sailplane. He visualized his father landing and taking off in one of the single-engine aircraft parked nose-to-tail on the other side of the perimeter fence.

At the airport entrance, in the centre of a traffic island, Halloway found the largest of the pyramids he had seen so far. Well over one hundred feet high, the memorial had been constructed entirely from automobile radiator grilles, a tour-de-force of ironic humour. Row upon row, the grilles rose to the apex, cunningly welded together to form staircases and internal galleries. For once, the tropical flora had barely gained a purchase on the base of the pyramid, and the still-gleaming chrome formed a brilliant lacework.

Impressed by the structure, Halloway made his way around it into the airport. Service roads led in all directions to the terminal buildings and air-freight offices. Fuel tankers and breakdown vehicles blocked the narrow lanes. Losing himself in this maze, Halloway decided to climb to the roof of a ten-storey car park whose canted floors spiralled up into the air behind the terminal buildings.

As he passed the elevators on his way to the staircase, Halloway without thinking touched the call button. To his surprise, the doors promptly responded, opening without any hesitation on well-oiled castors. The interior of the elevator was clean and well-maintained, the control panel freshly polished.

Listening to the faint drumming of an electric generator somewhere above the shaft, Halloway gathered his courage together. There was something seductive about this immaculate compartment, and already he was becoming impatient with himself for turning tail and leaving the city at the first alarm. Sooner or later he intended to come to terms with

whatever creature prowled its deserted canyons, and this car park would make a good observation post.

Stepping into the elevator, he inspected the control panel and pushed a button at random.

Within less than a minute he had ridden to the seventh floor and stepped out into what he soon discovered was a museum of automobiles. At first glance the cars were indistinguishable from the thousands of vehicles he had passed that day. But as he walked through the dim light, seeing his reflection in the burnished cellulose and waxed leather, he realized that he had stumbled on to a unique private museum. The sixty or so cars on this canted deck were all exhibition pieces, sitting squarely on inflated tyres, antique coachwork lovingly restored.

'Pierce Arrow . . . Bugatti . . . Hispano-Suiza . . . Chevrolet Impala . . .' Aloud, he read out the names from the manufacturers' medallions. Many of the cars dated back well over a century to the dawn of the automobile age, huge perambulators of brass and steel with high seats and coaching lamps larger than their diminutive engines. Others, slab-decked saloons and limousines, were as new as the models that covered the runways of the airport.

Cord. Stutz. Chrysler Imperial. Halloway climbed the deck to the eighth floor. More cars, all lovingly waxed and polished, faced each other through the gloom.

The one exception was parked in the centre of the ramp, a grimy six-wheeled breakdown truck with a heavy crane mounted on its rear platform. The engine cowling was still warm. Halloway opened the driver's door; on the seat were a toolkit and a set of maps of the city marked off into various zones. Ignition keys hung from the dashboard, and from the whole compartment came the raw but potent odour of carbonized oil, gasolene and engine coolant.

Sitting behind the steering wheel, Halloway felt the controls, trying to remember something of the casual expertise with which he so easily impressed the gang of ten-year-olds who watched him demonstrate how to drive.

Suddenly the engine was alive, thundering out between the concrete decks as if trying to shake itself apart. The heavy vehicle was vibrating fiercely, and the unlatched door bumped against Halloway's elbow. A blaze of lights lit up the dashboard. Gripping the wheel cautiously, Halloway released the handbrake and let the truck roll forward down the concrete incline, pressing the accelerator as the vehicle moved along at a steady two miles an hour.

Within thirty minutes he was driving around the airport at speed, roaring along the perimeter roads and down the one exposed section of runway. Flocks of startled ducks and geese rose from the reservoirs to the east of the airport, fleeing from the noise of the careening vehicle. When he first

emerged from the car park the truck had come to a halt, and it had taken Halloway some time to discover that the gear lever was in neutral. He soon learned to engage it, and set off at breakneck pace, slamming in and out of the parked cars. The heavy truck and its wildly swinging crane, steel hook lashing about, sent up a spray of rust from the cars kicked out of their way. The forward power of the vehicle, after the agile but passive motion of the sailplane, astonished Halloway. The slightest pressure of his foot on the accelerator sent the truck hurtling ahead. It was the raw energy of the machine that most impressed him, this gut-driven dynamo totally at one with the city across the river.

Carried away by his new-found determination, and confident that he could take on any opponent now, Halloway headed out of the airport. As he left the main gates he was already moving at sixty m.p.h. Too late, he released the accelerator as the road veered off to circle the traffic island with its pyramid of radiator grilles. Trying to slow down, he plunged across the grass verge, the concrete kerb almost rolling the truck on to its side. It hurtled forward, the crane's hook and heavy chains thrashing the cabin behind Halloway's head. He clung to the wheel, face hidden behind his arms, and felt himself flung across the cabin as the truck struck the lowest tier of the pyramid. It tore out a dozen radiator grilles, which hung like trophies from the dented fenders as it swerved away, ran head-on into the steel pylon of a route indicator and came to a halt on its side, cabin buried in the soft earth.

He was waking from a dream of powered flight.

He soared across a dark, windless sky. Through the rigging and fuselage struts behind his head came the steady beat of an engine. Beside him in the cockpit a man was crouching over the controls, as if hiding himself from Halloway. When he tried to see the face of this mysterious pilot the aircraft banked steeply, throwing Halloway against the canopy. Searching for a way to escape from the aircraft, he realized that it was built of glass, and that he could see the stars through the wings and fuselage. Unable to restrain himself, he seized the man's shoulder and tried to wrest the control column from him. As they struggled together the aircraft plunged across the sky, its engine screaming . . .

He woke to find himself in a dimly lit cabin, lying on a bed attached to the panelled wall. Leaning over Halloway, pulling with concern at his shoulder, was a young man about five years older than himself, a tall, slimly built Negro with an expression of wary concern on his shy but intelligent face.

Rest – you've landed safely.

A line of scarlet letters, in a stylized computer typeface, glowed in Halloway's eyes, hovering in the air two feet from him.

Can you hear me? You're not flying now.

Halloway nodded weakly, gazing at the message that seemed to emerge from the man's hand. Although there were windows in the cabin the air outside was almost opaque, as if they were contained by yet another building. Twenty feet away a second ceiling tilted across the sky.

'There was an engine on the glider,' Halloway explained. He sat up, pointing to the roof of the cabin. Somewhere above him there was the steady drumming of an internal-combustion engine. 'I can hear it now . . .'

Lights flickered in the Negro's palm. Again the strange alphabet sorted itself into a message. His pensive eyes presided over these reassembling letters as if over the anagrams of stigmata.

There is a power generator on the roof.

As if to reassure Halloway, he pressed a wall switch.

When the electric light – an antique tungsten-filament glow – came on in the cabin Halloway examined his surroundings. He was lying on a bunk in a large landcruiser, one of a group drawn up together on what he guessed was the top floor of the car park. In front of him, beyond a small kitchen, was the driver's compartment, the steering wheel and instrument panel below a high windshield.

Sitting beside him, clearly relieved to see Halloway regain consciousness, was the tenant of the cruiser. The left side of his face was covered by a fretwork of notches, minute cuts clearly inflicted during his childhood. At first Halloway assumed that they were some kind of tribal insignia, but later he learned that they were the scars left by a serious automobile accident.

With his intelligent face and curiously unfocused eyes, which seemed to be fixed on some point within his mind, he reminded Halloway of a circus clown without his make-up. He sat here in his land-cruiser with the same vaguely melancholy posture of the clowns whom Halloway and his friends visited in their trailers whenever they toured Garden City. As he gazed down at Halloway with his alert but neutral expression he looked as if he had been alone too long, and was unsure how to respond to the physical presence of another human being.

He touched Halloway's shoulder, obviously convincing himself that his visitor posed no threat.

Now – are you all right?

'I'm a lot better. I guess it was your truck I crashed.'

His rescuer waved this aside. He seemed about to speak, but checked himself. In one hand, almost hidden between his slim fingers, was a pocket calculator. With surprising swiftness, he tapped out a message, which flashed up on the alphanumeric display.

Forget it. There's not exactly a shortage here.

As he gazed through the window of the cruiser Halloway had the distinct impression that this solitary young mute was a prisoner here, high above this museum of cars in the centre of the abandoned airport. His fingers fluttered across the keys of the calculator. As each sentence came up it was

glanced at and quickly erased, fingers flicking away in this reverse Braille. Obviously he was used to holding long conversations with himself.

'I'm sorry about the truck,' Halloway said. Remembering the frightening violence he had witnessed that morning, he asked cautiously: 'Do you live here? What's your name?'

Olds.

'Olds? What, as in –?' Halloway laughed, despite himself, but the young Negro nodded, clearly taking no offence. Joining in the joke, he touched the scars on his scalp. Fingers flicked across the keyboard.

Yes. As in Oldsmobile. Ten years ago I renamed myself.

He stared at the illuminated message, his mind drifting away. An expression of regret hovered around his faint smile.

'Why not?' Halloway said encouragingly. 'I like it, it's a good name.' He looked at his watch. It was after two o'clock. He felt drawn to this solitary young Negro, but it was time to be moving on.

'Olds, I ought to be going.'

All right. But first have some food.

They left the cabin and stepped down on to the tenth floor of the car park. Four of the land-cruisers were drawn up to form a private enclosure. From the balustrade Halloway looked down at the thousands of vehicles that covered the airport.

The breakdown truck lay on its side by the pyramid of radiator grilles. He took for granted that Olds had constructed these monuments. On trestle tables beside the land-cruisers lay an extensive selection of electrical parts – dynamos and transformers, fuse-boxes and switching units. Power cables trailed across the floor, running from the generator on the roof to a barbecue in the centre of what he assumed was Olds' dining area. Rotating on the spit was the body of a small deer. The fused flesh gleamed like polished oak. Olds beckoned Halloway to a chair, and began to cut steaks from the carcass.

An hour later Halloway had finished the most intoxicating meal of his life, and made his decision to postpone any return to Garden City for as long as possible. After the pallid vegetarian cuisine of his childhood, the flavour of venison and animal fat acted on him like adrenalin. Surrounded by the bones and meat scraps, he felt like the early pioneers who had colonized this land and built its cities.

Olds had watched him eat with obvious pleasure. At intervals, as he urged him to take second and third helpings, his right hand flicked out some brief message to himself on the calculator, as if he were transcribing a commentary on a second life going on inside his head.

During their meal he told Halloway about himself, and how as a boy of five years old during the final evacuation of the city he had been knocked down by a housewife driving her Oldsmobile to the neighbourhood scrap-yard. Thus he had become the world's last traffic casualty. Fifteen years later, after a long and incomplete recovery from his brain injuries,

he left the technical training centre at the commune hospital fifty miles to the north of the city and made his home among the thousands of cars parked on the runways of this abandoned airport. Here, moved by some profound compulsion, he spent his time putting together this museum of cars, perhaps in an attempt to find the missing sections of his mind. His ambition, he explained to Halloway, was to have a running model of every make of car ever manufactured.

Only then will I come to terms with my accident.

He flashed a self-deprecating smile and added:

After that I can learn to fly.

Halloway nodded sympathetically, unsure whether Olds was pulling his leg. This clever, shy but self-confident man seemed to be all there as far as Halloway could tell. When they had finished the meal Halloway asked Olds to take him on a tour of the museum.

'You repaired all these yourself? It's hard to believe – in the first place, what about the fuel?'

Olds gestured casually at the sea of vehicles that stretched to the horizon on all sides of the car park.

There are five million cars in this city alone. Almost every tank still has a little gas in it.

Halloway walked down the line of cars, gazing at his reflections in the lovingly refurbished radiator, grilles, hub-caps and chromium trim. Olds led the way, pointing out a rare Mercedes 600, a Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud, a Facel Vega. He was clearly proud to show off his collection, but at the same time Halloway noticed that he seemed slightly bored by these vehicles. His eyes were forever straying to the moss-covered airliners parked by the terminal buildings.

'And you're sure they all run?' Halloway asked. He pointed to a resplendent limousine. 'What about this one – Daimler Majestic?'

With remarkable speed, Olds leapt behind the wheel of the car. Within seconds its engine roared out, headlamps pulsed, momentarily blinding Halloway. The horn sounded imperiously.

'Olds, it's unbelievable!' Halloway congratulated him. 'Let's see you try another – this Pontiac Firebird.'

For the next thirty minutes the two men moved through the museum, Halloway shouting and pointing to one car after another, Olds leaping like an excited faun, an automotive Ariel, from one driver's seat to the next, switching on the ignitions and bringing the engines to life. Each car he left with its motor racing and headlamps full on. First a dozen cars came alive, then more than thirty, and finally the entire eighth and ninth decks of the car park. The roar of the engines, the exhaust swirling in the headlamp beams, the vibrating floors and balustrades, the smell of burning fuel and the noise booming out over the deserted airport, made Halloway feel that the entire city had begun to spring to life, re-starting itself under the hands of this young recluse.

Finally, out of curiosity rather than cruelty, Halloway shouted out the

last name. 'One more, Olds! What about –' In the absence of the car, he pointed at random. '– Oldsmobile!'

Immediately Halloway regretted the prank. Too late, he saw the rictus on Olds' face. Sitting behind the wheel of a white Galaxie, he began to pound the controls, angry with the car when it failed to start on its own. When Halloway reached him he had slumped back and was already moving into a deep fugue, mouth agape, the blood in his face making a livid lace-work of the scars. On the seat beside him, like some hyper-excited small animal, his right hand flicked out a desperate message on the calculator.

'Olds . . . it doesn't matter!'

Halloway pulled open the door and tried to calm him. Bizarre messages glimmered among the headlamps as he sank into unconsciousness, the engines of a hundred cars throbbing around him in the exhaust-filled air.

Teach me to fly!

Within an hour Olds had recovered. Sitting back on a car seat beside the barbecue, he touched his face and scalp, feeling the tracery of scars as if making sure that the jigsaw was once again in place. After dragging him to the elevator and taking him back to his lair, Halloway had moved among the cars, switching off the engines one by one. When the building was silent again he leaned against the balustrade, looking out at the distant towers of the city. Despite the moss-covered airliners by the terminal buildings, Halloway noticed that he was no longer thinking of his quest for his parents' apartment. Already the elements of a far grander scheme were forming in his mind.

They sat together in the dusk, listening to the steady beat of the generator on the roof, their faces lit by the glow of the barbecue.

With the same innocent guile that he used on his grandfather, Halloway said: 'Olds, you're a genius with cars. But can you start up anything else?'

Olds nodded soberly at Halloway, not taken in by him for a moment. He inspected his slim hands, as if resigned to the talents multiplying from his fingertips.

Anything. I can make anything work.

'I believe you, Olds. We'll find my sailplane and you can put an engine and propeller on it. Then I'll teach you how to fly.'

Early the next morning Olds and Halloway set off together from the airport. Olds selected, apparently at random, another breakdown vehicle from his stable of trucks and pick-ups on the first floor of the car park. Into the rear section, where a generator was bolted to the deck, he slung a leather tool-case and reels of power cable. He had recovered from his seizure of the previous afternoon. Something about the prospect of flying had given him back his self-confidence. As they left the airport,

circling the pyramid of radiator grilles, he flicked a series of questions at Halloway.

What engine size? How many horse-power?

'I can't remember,' Halloway admitted. Already he was having to pretend that he had flown a powered craft. 'Big enough to drive a propeller. The size of this truck's?'

Far too heavy. I'll find an aero-engine.

They crossed the river and headed northwards through the city. At intervals Olds would check his fuel gauge, stop the truck in the centre of the street and leap out with a siphon hose. He moved around, shaking the parked cars and listening to the swish of fuel.

Once, while Olds was sucking away at his hose, Halloway strolled across the sidewalk to a small bar. A juke-box stood in the doorway, thick dust covering the extravagant plastic front. Halloway pressed the buttons at random, and then wandered off along the street.

When he returned five minutes later Olds had disappeared. The truck stood in the roadway, the engine of the power generator ticking over smoothly. The tool-bag had gone, and cables ran from the generator across the sidewalk.

'Olds! Let's go!'

Then he heard music coming from the bar. There was a jangle of coarse sound, a rapid beat of drums and guitars, and a rock-and-roll singer's voice bellowed across the empty street.

When he reached the bar he found Olds crouched behind the juke-box, tool-kit open on the floor. Like a leather carpet-bag fitted with hundreds of pockets, it seemed to contain every tool ever devised. Olds' arms were deep inside the entrails of the machine, hooking up a series of extension leads to a transformer.

When Halloway put his hands to his ears Olds switched off. He winked at Halloway.

That's only a beginning.

He was as good as his word. As they pressed on down the endless avenues lined with office-blocks, hotels and department-stores, Olds would stop the truck, seize his tool-kit and unwind his cables across the street. In rapid succession he started up three pintables in an amusement arcade, a line of washing machines in a launderette, a telex and two ticker-tapes in the ground-floor office of a commercial business, and a complete appliance range in a home equipment store. As if in rehearsal for some lunatic household, mixers whirred, fan-heaters pumped, vacuum cleaners roared, a dozen other gadgets clattered and whistled.

Watching all this, Halloway was impressed by the casual way Olds turned on these devices. They moved northwards, animating these minuscule portions of the city, leaving behind them these happy nodes of activity.

Confused by the noise and excitement, Halloway sat limply in the truck when they reached the mirror-sheathed office block into which he had

crashed. The sailplane lay among the cars, its broken wings stirring in the light air. As Olds moved around it, inspecting the inverted cockpit with his gentle but shrewd eyes, Halloway half-expected him to reassemble the glider with a few waves of his screwdriver.

Olds pointed to the humpbacked cockpit, where the strengthened fuselage frame behind the pilot's seat formed a platform whose purpose Halloway had never understood.

This is a real aircraft. Designed to take an engine. But you built it to look like a glider?

'I know,' Halloway lied. 'I couldn't find the right power-plant.'

Olds' quick hands were exploring the interior of the fuselage.

Runs for control lines. A fuel-tank compartment. It's well thought out. And room for both of us.

'What?' Genuinely surprised, Halloway peered into the cockpit.

Behind the pilot's bulkhead there's space for a passenger.

As Olds pointed with the calculator, Halloway stared at what his father clearly designed to be a rear seat. Had his mother and father planned to leave him behind when they flew off? Or perhaps his father had intended to take his son with him, the two of them soaring back to the city together. Puzzled by these discoveries, he noticed Olds watching him in a shrewd but still kindly way. Did Olds really believe that Halloway had designed this powered glider himself? Was he using Halloway in exactly the same way that Halloway was trying to exploit him?

For the time being it hardly mattered. Halloway took the wheel for the return journey to the airport, after they dismantled the glider and lashed the sections to the truck. The power and noise of the engine erased all doubts. Barely controlling his excitement, he tried to hold down their speed as they raced through the streets.

'Olds! Watch this!'

They crossed a section of the roadway planted with poppies, the vivid but sinister flowers extending in front of them for three hundred yards. The bumper of the truck scythed through the flowers, and a dense cloud of petals billowed into the air, staining the sky like a miniature sunset. Halloway turned and made a second run through the poppies, almost standing at the wheel as they hurtled through the whirling petals.

As they approached the centre of the city Halloway drove around the side-streets, hunting out any other of these floral tracts planted here in the broken asphalt by some aberrant gardener. Soon millions of leaves were drifting through the coloured air. There were white streets where they found daisies, yellow avenues filled with a mist of crushed buttercups, blue boulevards which wept a rain of forget-me-nots.

Then, as they emerged from a storm of daffodil petals, Halloway nearly collided into a large industrial tractor moving along the roadway in front of him. Pulling to a halt behind its high rear assembly, he flung Olds on to the dashboard. Halloway switched off the engine, and watched this

massive tracked vehicle lumbering slowly through the haze of petals. A hydraulic ram was mounted in front of the motor, fitted with an immense claw that now held a single automobile, carried in the air fifteen feet from the ground.

In the control cabin a dark-haired man in a black plastic jacket emblazoned with silver studs was operating the steering levers. His face was barely visible through the whirling petals, and he seemed unaware of the truck stalled behind him. However, when Halloway restarted his engine, intending to overtake the tractor, the driver swung his claw to the right, blocking Halloway with the swinging automobile. Looking up at the man's handsome face, with its hard mouth like a piece of gristle, Halloway was certain that it was this driver, and this terrifying machine, which had destroyed the garment store mannequins the previous day.

Halloway began to reverse the truck down the street, but Olds held his arm warningly.

Follow him. Stillman needs to be given his own way.

As Halloway moved forward, following the tractor, Olds sat back. He had switched off the calculator, and seemed to have forgotten their exhilarating race through the flowers, his mind moving elsewhere, bored by the prospect of whatever was to come.

They emerged into an open square, set in the heart of one of the oldest sections of the city, an area of theatres, bars and cheap hotels. Rising from the centre of the square was the largest of the eccentric memorials to Twentieth-Century technology that Halloway had seen so far. At first glance it resembled a gothic cathedral, built entirely from rusting iron, glass and chromium. As they crossed the square, following the tractor, Halloway realized that this structure was built entirely from the bodies of automobiles. Stacked one upon the other, they formed a palisade of towers that rose two hundred feet into the air.

A group of heavy cranes and a buttress of scaffolding marked out the working face, overlooked by an observation platform reached by a simple elevator. Standing at the rail, and waiting for the tractor to carry its latest contribution to the memorial, was a small, pugnacious man of advanced age. Although well into his eighties, he was dressed like a physical education instructor in immaculate white sweater and well-creased trousers. Inspecting Halloway's glider with a critical eye, he picked up an electric megaphone and began to call out instructions in a high voice to the driver of the tractor.

Olds was gazing up at the monument of cars, shaking his head as if ruefully aware that he and this odd old man were in the same business. He switched on the calculator.

I'll wait for you here. You're about to meet Mr Buckmaster. Viceroy, czar, and warden of this island.

Halloway waited as the driver climbed down from his cab. Deliberately taking his time, he sauntered over to Halloway, pointing to his red, white and blue sneakers, yellow trousers and shirt covered with petals.

'The Rainbow Kid – you come down from the sky and have yourself a time . . .'

Although twice Halloway's age, with slicked-back hair and a pale skin that would always appear dirty, he had a lazy, youthful aura, as if a large section of his life had passed in his absence and he himself had never aged beyond his twenties. For all his sarcastic manner, he seemed watchful and ready to ingratiate himself at a moment's notice. With his self-directed aggression and stylized swagger he was a type Halloway had never known at Garden City, but which all his reading confirmed was a classic specimen of metropolitan man.

'Take the elevator,' he told Halloway. 'Mr Buckmaster has been waiting to meet you. He'll want to induct you into his workforce.'

'This monument – and the others? He built them all?'

'*I* built them. Buckmaster merely dreamed up the whole mad idea. Homage to the Chrysler Corporation, Datsun and General Motors. When we've finished, the spirit of Karl Benz will be laid to rest under a million driver's licences and parking tickets.'

He slammed the elevator grille in Halloway's face and punched the ascend button.

The old man in his whites was waiting for Halloway when he reached the observation platform. On a card-table lay a set of blueprints, and Halloway could see that if ever completed the structure would rise some four hundred feet into the air.

The old man beckoned Halloway to the rail. Everything about him, his quick eyes and mouth, his restless hands, was in a hurry. He talked to Halloway as if he had known him for years and was resuming a conversation interrupted only a few seconds earlier.

'It looks a mess, eh? Just a pile of automobiles, a million junkyards are full of them. What do I think I'm doing? Wait and see.' He pointed to Halloway's glider on the back of the truck, where Olds was already tearing away the torn fabric. 'Is that a glider or a power-plane? During the war I built thirty thousand fighters for the government, we were turning them out so fast the Air Force kept the war going just to get rid of them. And that was on top of a hundred airships, cargo-submarines and enough spare parts to give every man on this planet his own robot-assembly kit. Then I re-tooled and flooded the world with wristwatch TVs, compressed paper houses, a million gimmicks. Techniques of mass production raised to the nth power. Do you remember my protein synthesizer?' He glanced at Halloway, who nodded promptly. 'No, you're too young. No bigger than a suitcase, you put it under your bed at night and it ran off your sweat and body temperature. Somehow it didn't catch on, but I would have fed a starving world, lifted the population of this planet to fifty billion in comfort. I was ready to build them super-cities, the first conurbation conglomerates, the mega-metropolis larger than any individual nation-state. I designed the first collapsible city, interchangeable

parts moving around on gigantic rails. Makes sense – if a theatre isn't being used by day, wheel it off and roll on an office-block. Instead of which' – here he raised his ancient hands eloquently to the empty streets – 'they all just gave up and faded away. Goodbye, C20 Man, hello Arcadia, that timid world of waterwheels and solar batteries. Not that there's an unlimited future for tidal power. Every time one of those pontoons nods its head the planet slows down a little. The days are getting longer . . .'

He turned away from the rail, and put a hard arm around Halloway's shoulder. 'Now, you've come to work for me? It's too late, I closed down my last design office ten years ago.' He steered Halloway to the elevator, nodding sagely to himself as they rode down together. 'A pity, you could have done great things with those hands. Anyway, you can work for Stillman, there's more than he can do.'

'Well . . .' Halloway glanced at the black-jacketed driver, standing beside the tractor with one hand on the automobile suspended in the air over his head. 'I was thinking of setting up on my own.'

'Good for you – but it's all over. There's nothing to do now but close it down. Give it a humane burial, put up a monument here and there to Twentieth-Century technology, to all those things we took for granted – tyres, engines, TVs, kitchen appliances, automobiles . . .'

His voice wavered for the first time and then stopped, as he gazed up wistfully at his cathedral of cars. Waiting for this strange old man to start again, Halloway remembered that he had seen his combative jaw and dreamer's eyes in the architecture textbooks in his grandfather's library. Buckmaster had been the last of the great entrepreneur-industrialists, part architect and engineer, part visionary, driven on by old-fashioned crankiness, ceaseless originality and a well-developed talent for seizing the headlines. Grandiose projects started all over the world and then abandoned to rivals and pupils, a succession of wives, the third of whom died in a mysterious scandal, lawsuits against any number of governments, plans for the first trans-Atlantic bridge – these were elements in a stormy career spanning nearly seventy years. Although Buckmaster was clearly living a century too late there was something about his unflagging energy and resolve that fired a response in Halloway's mind. He couldn't help contrasting Buckmaster's limitless appetite for steel, power, concrete and raw materials with the self-denying, defeatist lives of the engineers and architects at Garden City. There was even a fringe group of scientific fanatics – the so-called 'heliophiles' – whose ambition was to return energy to the sun by firing off all the old missiles with nuclear warheads, repaying the sun for its billion-year bounty.

He followed Buckmaster into the interior of the memorial, uneasily aware that this cathedral of rust might collapse at any time. At the far end of the nave the semi-circle of internal walls had been transformed into a lavish botanical garden. Terrace upon terrace of climbing plants hung from the chassis of the cars, brilliant flowers bloomed in the windows and

wheel-wells. The golden bells of forsythia trailed from the windows of grand limousines a hundred feet in the air, the white mist of mile-a-minute vines hovered like steam above the radiator grilles and exhaust pipes.

Apparently unaware that this cascade of blossoms was already transforming his monument into a far more bizarre structure than he had visualized, Buckmaster began to point out various details of the construction. But Halloway was more interested in the hanging garden. A young woman was working at the flowers, taking nasturtium and petunia seedlings from a series of trays and planting them in the doors and windows. As she moved about, climbing up and down a high ladder, Halloway had difficulty in guessing her age. At Garden City the emancipated women wore simple home-woven smocks and jerkins indistinguishable from the men's. With undressed hair and devoid of make-up, their sexual roles were always explicit, desire worn casually on their sleeves.

By contrast, this young woman – his daughter Miranda, Buckmaster informed him – was dressed like the heroine of a lavishly costumed period musical. Everything about her, from her extravagant copper-tinted hair in a Pre-Raphaelite cut to her long white neck and embroidered art-nouveau gown, was calculated for concealment and effect, artifice and allure. Later, Halloway discovered that she changed her appearance every day, moving through the deserted boutiques and fashion-houses of the city, modelling herself on the vanished styles of the Twentieth Century. On one day she would appear in a cream cloche hat and Gatsby gown, on another in a lurex blouse, bobby sox and teenager's flared tartan skirt.

Buckmaster introduced Halloway to her. 'Miranda, a new recruit – Mr Halloway, an aviator from Garden City. Any more like him and I may have to think again about opening my design office.'

As the old man wandered around, nodding at the profusion of flowers, Halloway searched for something to say. In his yellow trousers and multi-coloured sneakers he was as much in costume as Buckmaster's daughter, but he felt gauche and clumsy beside her. Although she was his own age, there was something naive, and at the same time knowing and sophisticated, about Miranda. He guessed that he was the first young man of eighteen she had met, but that she had done a great deal of thinking about the subject and for all her shyness was well prepared to deal with him on her own terms.

'We watched you driving around,' she told him matter-of-factly and without any rancour. 'Killing all those flowers – in a way it must have been fun.'

'Well . . .' Lamely, Halloway tried to apologize. He helped her down the ladder, relieved when she was on his own level. There was something unsettling about the way she had looked down at him, surrounded by the vine-infested cars. 'I didn't realize that they were yours. I'll help you to plant them again – they'll soon grow.'

'I know.' She strolled around him, picking the petals from his shirt, as

if removing spots of blood. 'Sometimes I feel like the daughter of some great magician – wherever I touch, a flower springs up.'

Halloway brushed away the last of the petals. His difficulty in talking to her stemmed partly from her ambiguity, the naively teasing sexual come-on, but more from his own inexperience. In Garden City the relations between young people were governed by the most enlightened rules, derived from the teachings of Malinowski, Margaret Mead and the anthropologists who had followed them. From the age of sixteen, in the approved Polynesian style, young people of both sexes lived together openly in the 'long house' dormitories set aside for them until they later chose their marriage partner. Halloway had opted out of this, for reasons he had never understood, so committing himself to the company of his grandparents on one side and the younger teenagers on the other. He had never regretted the decision – there was something far too amiable, far too bovine and uncritical, about the hand-holding tenants of the long house.

Now, as he watched Miranda admiring his coloured sneakers, swirling her embroidered dress around him, he was certain that he was right. That ambiguity she showed, that moody combination of challenge and allure, was exactly what the city was about.

'I saw your glider yesterday,' Miranda told him. 'Crossing the Sound. It was like part of a dream, miles away across the water. Now suddenly you're here, in your miracle shoes.'

'*I* dream about powered flight,' Halloway told her with some pride. 'Olds and I are rebuilding the glider. When it's ready we'll put an engine on it.'

Miranda nodded, gazing up at her hanging garden, as if waiting patiently for the jungle to return. In some way she seemed almost at odds with her father, trying to undo his work and transform it for her own purposes.

'Halloway . . .' She touched his arm. 'My father's very old. I want him to finish this before it's too late. Stillman's losing interest. Will you work for us for a while?'

The next day Halloway joined Stillman's one-man construction gang. He had said goodbye to Olds, who returned with the sailplane to the airport, and spent the night in one of the small hotels around the square.

Riding on the cowling of the tractor's engine, Halloway squatted in front of the driving cab as Stillman roved the city, searching for the exact models of the cars that Buckmaster had ordered. Each one they carried back to the monument, and Halloway climbed the wall of vehicles and guided Stillman as he steered the largest of the cranes and inserted the car into its place. From the observation platform the old industrialist supervised the work from behind his blueprints. Meanwhile his daughter, dressed for the day in a 1940s business suit, with boxy shoulders and a skirt of brown pin-stripe, her hair in a frizz, moved silently among the flowers in the centre of the memorial, tending the vines and blossoms in this dark, humid arbour.

His involvement with this strange trio surprised Halloway, but he soon realized that each of them played a role in certain unfolding obsessions of his own. Of the three, Stillman with his black jacket and hoodlum style most disturbed and most stimulated him, brooding over a dark dream of the city so like Halloway's own.

As they drove back through the streets on that first day Halloway had an unsettling glimpse of Stillman's unpredictable violence. The massive tractor was clanking down a wide avenue, a yellow taxi-cab held in its claw, when they passed a department store. Halloway was sitting in front of the cab, and was nearly flung to the road as Stillman slammed back the left-hand drive lever and turned the tractor towards the sidewalk. Cars were parked nose to tail along the kerb, but Stillman drove straight into them, knocking them out of his way with powerful left and right swings of the taxi. Gripped by the claw, the battered vehicle showered glass and rust on to the road. Working the levers and throttle with hard and almost spasm-like thrusts of his arms and shoulders, Stillman drove the tractor towards the store. His jaws champed rapidly on a piece of gum, but his face was deliberately expressionless, part of a continuous stylization of gesture and movement that Halloway had never seen before and that excited and disturbed him at the same time.

A group of mannequins sat in the store window around a table, part of a mock dinner-party that had started twenty-five years earlier and never proceeded beyond the waxy hors d'oeuvres. The polite poses and prim over-elegant manners clearly pulled a hair-trigger in Stillman's mind. As the plate glass collapsed into the sidewalk he slung aside the taxi, sending it rolling across the street, and then began to sweep the mannequins out of the window, scattering them on to the sidewalk.

As he watched the destruction of these smartly attired female figures, Halloway was thinking of Miranda and her obsessive changes of costume. Was this her way of containing Stillman, or of provoking him? Stillman stared at her with a kind of humourless irony, as if forming in his mind a series of obscene jokes about her. Only his deference to the old industrialist seemed to prevent him from assaulting Miranda.

Seizing the yellow taxi again, Stillman set off down the street, the shattered mannequins lying in their tailored rags like the well-to-do victims of a terrorist attack in a fashionable shopping centre. Halloway was shaking with excitement, barely able to keep his seat on the engine cowling. For all his fear of Stillman, he knew that he was half-hoping that he would be violent again. He imagined the city filled with people, their lives invigorated by just this kind of callous and stylized aggression. When they passed another clothing store with a group of mannequins in the window he tapped the windshield and pointed them out to Stillman.

Later, when Buckmaster and his daughter retired to their third-floor suite in a hotel facing the monument of cars, Stillman and Halloway wandered through the dusk towards a nearby park. Stillman broke into a gunshop, and from the racks behind the counter took down a sporting

rifle and shotgun. Pockets filled with cartridges, they strolled into the park, and in the evening light shot quail and a small deer. The roar of gunfire, the coarse smell of the cordite and the hard recoil against his arms and shoulders, the terrified movement of thousands of birds and animals as they fled through the forest, together filled Halloway's head with fantasies of violence.

Stillman occupied a penthouse apartment on the twentieth floor of a block facing the park.

'It's a long climb,' he warned Halloway. 'But I like to sit up there in the morning and watch dinner grazing down below.'

On the open terrace they lit a fire with pieces of furniture taken from the other apartments. Around them the walls of the city rose into the night. As he roasted the quail and turned the deer on its spit Halloway could see the flames reflected in thousands of darkened windows, as if the night were on fire. They sat together in armchairs by the embers flaring in the wind, and Stillman talked about the city, of the period he could just remember when it had been filled with more than a million people, the streets packed with traffic and the skies with helicopters, a realm of ceaseless noise and activity, competition and crime. It was here, in fact, as a young student at the school of architecture, that Stillman had first met Buckmaster. Within six months he had killed the industrialist's third wife in a lovers' quarrel. The last murderer to be tried and convicted before the emigration from the cities began in earnest, he was sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment. Eighteen years later, rotting away in an empty penitentiary, the sole prisoner looked after by one aged warder, he had been freed by Buckmaster, who took him on his own parole in a strange gesture. Now he worked for the old man, operating the heavy lifting equipment and helping him to build his monuments to a vanished age of technology. All the while he could barely contain his anger at finding the city he had longed for through so many years an empty and abandoned shell.

Halloway listened to him without speaking. When Stillman finished and lay back in his armchair, staring at the embers of the fire and the bones scattered at his feet, Halloway walked to the balustrade and looked at the dark buildings around them.

'Stillman – it isn't too late. It's all waiting for us here. We can start it up again. Olds can bring it back to life for us.'

During the next month, as he continued to work for the old industrialist on his memorials, Halloway began his self-appointed task of reanimating this huge metropolis. The cathedral of cars now reached to a height of three hundred feet, an eccentric but impressive structure of steel, glass and chrome. As it neared completion Buckmaster began to slow down, as if aware that this last monument would mark the end of his life and career.

Free during the afternoons, Halloway returned to Stillman's apartment

house. Invariably he found the slim patient figure of Olds standing beside his breakdown truck. The mute's hopes of learning to fly, his dream of escape from the thousands of cars that surrounded him at the airport and the memories of his accident, had become the central obsession of his life. On the one afternoon when Halloway could spare the time to visit the airport he found his sailplane on the roof of the car park, tethered to the sloping concrete deck like a prisoner of the sky. Olds had rebuilt the wings and fuselage, and was already preparing a fifty horse-power engine and propeller to be mounted above the cockpit.

Nodding his approval, Halloway noticed that the museum of cars was already showing signs of neglect. Dust filmed the once immaculate coachwork, leaves and tags of paper lay against the unwiped windshields. As Olds gazed at the sailplane the calculator in his hand flickered continuously.

Halloway, we'll leave soon. When I've assembled the engine.

'Of course,' Halloway reassured him. 'We're going together, I know.'

Flying lessons?

There was panic in the quivering letters.

I can't fly yet!

'Olds, naturally. You won't find it difficult – look at the way you handle machinery, you're a genius.'

But Olds was only interested in the aircraft. In the aviation section of one of the city's science museums he found a leather flying suit and helmet dating back to World War I. He took to wearing the costume, his slight figure and scarred head encased in this antique aviator's gear.

For the time being, Halloway decided to humour him. Olds was essential to his plan to restart the city, and without his electrical and mechanical skills the metropolis would remain as dead as a tomb. In return for the promise of flying lessons, Olds drove in from the airport each afternoon, equipped with his generators, cables and tool-kit.

Sceptical of Halloway's ambitious scheme, Stillman wandered through the densely forested park with his rifle, killing the birds. Meanwhile Olds fitted the apartment house with its own electricity supply. A gasolene-driven generator in the entrance hall was soon pounding away, its power supply plugged into the mains. Even this small step immediately brought the building alive. Halloway moved from one apartment to the next, flicking lights on and off, working the appliances in the kitchens. Mixers chattered, toasters and refrigerators hummed, warning lights glowed in control panels. Most of the equipment, barely used during the long period of power cuts twenty-five years earlier, was still in functioning order. Television sets came on, radios emitted a ghostly tonelessness interrupted now and then by static from the remote-controlled switching units of the tidal pumps twenty miles away along the Sound.

However, in the tape-recorders, stereo-systems and telephone answering machines Halloway at last found the noise he needed to break the silence of the city. At first, playing through these tapes of conversations

recorded by husbands and wives in the last years of the Twentieth Century, Halloway was disturbed by the anxious queries and despairing messages that described the slow collapse of an entire world. The sense of gloom and psychic entropy that came through these reminders to queue for gasolene and cooking oil were the absolute opposite of the vigour and dynamism he had expected.

But the music was different. Almost every apartment seemed to be a broadcasting station of its own. Bursting with crude confidence, the music transformed these ghost-filled rooms into a battery of nightclubs. He moved from floor to floor, blowing the dust from records and cassettes, switching on each of the apartments in turn. Rock-and-roll, big band, jazz and pop boomed through the open windows at the silent park. Even Stillman was impressed, looking up in surprise from the waist-high grass, shotgun raised hesitantly to the air as if thinking twice about trying to make an equal noise.

'Olds, it works!' Halloway found him resting by the generator in the lobby. 'If we can switch on this building we can switch on the whole city! Take off that flying cap and we'll start now.'

Reluctantly, Olds peeled off his helmet. He smiled ungrudgingly at Halloway, clearly admiring the energy and enthusiasm of this excited young man, but at the same time he seemed to be estimating his degree of involvement with Halloway. Although surrounded by his tools and cables, ammeters and transformers, his mind was clearly miles away, in the cockpit of the glider on the roof of the car park. He looked bored by what he was doing, hardly the mechanic to the world whom Halloway needed.

Halloway noticed that Olds had found a second calculator. The two instruments lay side by side on the floor, the fragments of an extended private dialogue flicking to and fro under the Negro's fingers. For the first time Halloway felt impatient.

'Olds – do you want flying lessons or not? If you can't help me I'll find someone else.' Enjoying his aggressive manner, he added, 'Old Buckmaster will know someone.'

I'll help you, Halloway.

For one flying lesson.

So Olds joined Halloway in his grand design. While Halloway drove over to the airport to collect the generators stored in the basement of the car park, Olds worked away at the apartment block, repairing the elevator and air-conditioning units. With almost magical ease he moved around the building, opening fuse-boxes, trailing cable from a second generator to the motors in the elevator head. When Halloway returned he found Olds serenely raising the elevator like a moody but elegant trapeze artist.

'Olds – it's unbelievable . . .' Halloway congratulated him, careful to add, 'Wait until you repair the jet planes at the airport.'

Olds shook his head, watching Halloway reflectively, not taken in by him for a moment.

A little too much – even for me.

'Nothing is – now, we'll help Mr Buckmaster.'

Leaving a dozen stereograms to blare their music into the empty streets, Halloway and Olds set off for the mausoleum. Buckmaster was resting in his bedroom. Flattered by Halloway's concern, he watched with approval from his balcony as Olds manhandled a generator into the lobby and ran the cables up to his suite.

From the breakdown truck Halloway unloaded a battery of six arc-lights he had removed from the façade of the airport terminal building.

'We'll set them up around the square, sir,' Halloway explained. 'At night you'll be able to see the whole monument floodlit.'

Buckmaster strolled across the square, his sharp eyes following Halloway with some curiosity as he darted enthusiastically around the cathedral of cars, setting the arc-lights in position. Deep in the nave of the monument Miranda was at work on the terraces of her hanging garden. Dressed today in blue jeans and a hippy jacket, a child's beads around her wrists, she was placing petunias and nasturtiums among the radiator grilles thirty feet above the ground. During the previous days Halloway had been too busy to make contact with her. Besides, her fey manner unsettled him. There seemed to be something decadent about this obsessive planting of vines and flowers, an unconscious but all the more sinister attempt to bring back a lurid and over-bright nature red in tooth and claw. Halloway had begun to hate the carpets of blossoms, these creepers and climbing plants that threatened to strangle the city before he could release it. Already he was thinking of the defoliants he had noticed in a chemical supplies store.

'I'm grateful to you, Halloway,' Buckmaster told him as they walked back to the hotel. 'There's a sense of style about you that I like, all too rare these days, you belong to a vanished breed – Brunel, Eiffel, Lloyd Wright, Kaiser, Buckmaster. For once, though, don't pitch your dreams too high. What happens when the gas runs out? You're going to have a second energy crisis all your own.'

Halloway shook his head confidently. 'Sir, there are millions of cars here. The tankers at the airport – some of them are half-full of aviation fuel, enough to keep us going for a year. After that' – Halloway gestured at the air – 'we'll find something else.'

His hand on Halloway's shoulder, Buckmaster listened to the sound of the generator coming to life in the lobby. He watched the arc-lights pulse briefly and then blaze out, almost over-heating the sunshine. For all the old industrialist's caution, Halloway could sense Buckmaster's excitement. Halloway was glad of this. For some reason he wanted to impress him. He was aware that the image of his father, which had propelled him towards the city, had recently begun to fade in his mind, confined to the sailplane tethered like an imprisoned bird on the roof of the car park.

Halloway pointed at the deserted streets around the square. 'There's so much that should have happened here that never did,' he explained to Buckmaster. 'I want to bring everything alive again, and give back to the city all that lost time.'

During the next weeks Halloway embarked on his grandiose scheme to re-animate the city. From the start he knew that the task of literally bringing back to life the whole of this huge metropolis was beyond the skills of even a hundred men like Olds. However, in a symbolic sense the task could be achieved on a more modest scale.

Adjoining the northern side of the square was a cluster of side-streets that formed a self-sufficient neighbourhood cut off from the fifty-storey buildings surrounding it. By chance, this enclave, little more than a block in extent, contained the whole city in miniature. There were modest hotels and theatres, bars and restaurants, even a police station and one television studio. Wandering around these narrow streets in the afternoons, Halloway noticed that the stores and offices, banks and supermarkets had been built to a smaller scale than in the rest of the city, and at a time before the zoning ordinances which would have excluded the light factories erected in back-yards, the auto-repair shops in converted garages. On the first floors above the bars and shops were dozens of one-man businesses, minor printing works and travel agencies, tailors and TV repairers.

Sitting on a stool in an empty bar, Halloway calculated that the working population of this city-in-miniature would have been little more than 2000 in its heyday. Even now, a hundred people like himself would be able to get most of its activities going again.

Through the weeks that followed, Halloway and Olds, with grudging help from Stillman, began the task of bringing this neighbourhood back to life. Olds drove in from the airport with a yellow-hulled fuel tanker, filled with enough aviation spirit to power a hundred generators for a month. Tirelessly, he moved in and out of the inspection tunnels below the sidewalks, opening up the electricity sub-stations and feeding down fresh cable. Meanwhile Halloway cut away the tangle of overhead wires that crossed the streets in steel webs, and then he and Olds began the laborious task of re-wiring the roadways. First the street lights came on, filling these deserted thoroughfares with an eerie brilliance, then the traffic signals and pedestrian control signs. Stillman cleared away the hundreds of derelict cars that lined the streets, leaving some twenty vehicles that Olds decided he could renovate.

Supervising all this activity, Halloway drove around in a black-and-white police car whose engine the young Negro had brought to life. Halloway had made the local police station his operational headquarters. The lavish wall-maps and communications equipment, the electric alarm signals that ran to so many of the stores and businesses, even the clandestine listening devices which the police had bugged in to many of the bars and hotels, made the station a natural headquarters.

Often working a dozen hours a day, Halloway pressed on, too tired in the evenings to do more than fall asleep in his apartment two floors below Stillman's. Despite all their efforts, however, the chaos seemed to grow rather than diminish. Piles of garbage covered the sidewalks, dozens of generators and fuel drums blocked the doorways of the bars and supermarkets, everywhere there were sections of dismantled switchboards and circuitry.

But one afternoon, after returning from the airport with a small lathe for Olds, he knew that he had succeeded.

A hundred yards from the station he was approaching a minor street intersection when the traffic lights turned from green to red. Laughing aloud at himself for obeying this solitary signal in an empty city of ten thousand intersections, in which he was its only traffic policeman, Halloway nonetheless pulled to a halt and waited until the lights changed to green. An important principle was at stake. Later, as he sat in the cabin of Stillman's tractor, bulldozing the piles of garbage and collapsed electric signs out of the streets, Halloway reflected that he was not working for himself alone. In the three supermarkets within the reclamation zone he drained the freezer compartments, swept the aisles and re-stacked the pyramids of canned goods, like a dedicated resort hotelier preparing for an invasion army of tourists. Three taxi-cabs, each in running order, stood outside the neighbourhood's leading hotel. One by one the streets were cleared of debris and abandoned cars, the sidewalks were free from garbage, the plate-glass shopfronts gleamed anew.

Amused but impressed by the transformation, Stillman at last decided to take part. At first, Halloway was reluctant to recruit this deviant figure. Every day Halloway heard him moving around the city, the violent explosions of breaking steel and glass as he dragged down another department-store portico and ran his tracks over the mannequins. In the evenings, as they sat together on the flood-lit terrace of the penthouse, Stillman would gaze resentfully across the roasting deer, as if annoyed that the dark dream of the city which had sustained him for so long should be brought to life in so naive a fashion by this idealistic youth. Then, one evening when Halloway was rhapsodizing about the harshness and vitality of his neat and immaculate streets, Stillman brusquely shut him up and announced that he would join the reclamation project. Clearly he had decided to inject some real life into this toy-town neighbourhood. He curtly turned down Halloway's suggestion that he take over the renovation of a store selling kitchen equipment.

'That's not my style, Halloway. I leave the domestic sciences to you. My expertise lies in other areas . . .'

In no time Stillman had staked out two amusement arcades, several bars and a small nightclub in the basement of an office block. Once Olds had supplied electric current Stillman set to work with a will, moving at a far swifter pace than his usual surly languor had ever previously allowed. The amusement arcades were soon a blaze of garish lights. Pinball machines

chattered and clanged, score numerals stuttered. In the communications room of the police station Halloway sat by the monitor screen of the traffic-control television system, watching the multicoloured lights ripple across the sidewalks.

Stillman had stripped down the punctured neon signs above the bars and arcades. From a warehouse discovered somewhere he brought in a truckload of intact signs, massive pieces of electrographic architecture that dominated the whole of Halloway's neighbourhood. Giant letters dripped across the night sky, cascades of pink light fell mushily across the façade of his nightclub, the winged emblems of long-vanished airlines pulsed through the overloaded air, the roof-sills of bars and amusement arcades were trimmed with tubes of racing fluorescence.

Watching uneasily on his TV monitor, Halloway wondered how to put a stop to this lurid invasion. At dusk, as the surrounding city grew dark, he left the police station and cruised the streets in his squad-car, listening to the generators beating in the basements and alleyways, the tireless hearts pumping out this haemorrhage of light. He knew now why Stillman had been so dismissive of his laborious restocking of offices and supermarkets. It was only now, in this raucous light and noise, that the city was being its true self, only in this flood of cheap neon that it was really alive.

Halloway parked outside a bank he had begun to reclaim. Olds' tool-bags and equipment trolleys were by the doorway. He had been working on the electrically operated vault doors before leaving for the airport, and the piles of old banknotes lay exposed in their metal trays. Halloway looked down at the bales of notes, worthless now but a fortune thirty years earlier. In Garden City money was never used, and had given way to a sophisticated system of barter and tithes-giving that eliminated the abuses of credit, instalment-buying and taxation.

Touching the banknotes, with their subtle progression from one denomination to the next, a means of quantifying the value of everything, its promise and obligation, Halloway watched the garish lights of the neon signs in the street flicker across his hands. He was glad that Stillman had transformed this staid and well-swept thoroughfare. They needed workers for the stores and offices and production lines, and they needed visitors for the hotels and bars. They would need money, as well, to oil the engine of competition.

Halloway locked away the trays of banknotes and slipped the keys into his pocket. There were thousands of other banks in the city, but in the printing shop next to the police station Olds would over-print the notes with Halloway's frank. The thought pleased him – to have reached the point of issuing his own currency meant that success was really at hand.

He ended his evening rounds at the square. Lit by the arc-lights, Buckmaster's memorial of cars rose over three hundred feet into the air, a cathedral of rust. The vines and flowers that climbed its sides looked dead in the fierce light. Halloway was glad to see that their once vivid colours were blanched out by the powerful glare. A dozen reflections in

the dark buildings around the square transformed it into a mortuary plain of illuminated tombs.

Buckmaster stood on the steps of his hotel, looking with obvious pleasure at this huge spectacle. Miranda, however, watching from a window above, stared at Halloway with equally clear hostility. That afternoon Halloway had stripped the last of the poppies and forget-me-nots from the avenues around the reclamation zone. As he crossed the square at the controls of the tractor, the bale of flowers in the metal scoop like a multicoloured haystack, Miranda followed him through the streets, catching in her white hands the loose petals that drifted in the air.

Now, on her balcony, she was dressed in a bizarre Barbarella costume of silver metal and glass, like a science-fiction witch about to take her revenge on Halloway.

Unaware of his daughter's anger, Buckmaster took Halloway's arm and pointed to a building across the square, the offices of a former newspaper. A frieze of electric letters that had once carried a continuous news strip had been repaired by Olds, a city-sized replica of the display panels of his pocket calculators. Letters began to race from right to left.

'Halloway, they ought to hand you the mayoral chain, my boy, and put your name up there, high, wide and handsome!'

But already the first message was flashing past.

OLDS! OLDS! OLDS! OLDS! OLDS!

Delighted by this, Halloway joined Buckmaster and rode the elevator with the old industrialist to the observation platform beside his cathedral. As they stepped out, however, a new message was racing across the display sign.

DANGER! FIVE MILES NORTH-EAST. INVASION PARTY COMING.

Two days later, when the rescue expedition arrived, Halloway was ready to deal with them in his own way. During that first night after Olds had given the alarm he spent the long hours until dawn in the top-floor offices of the newspaper building. Soon after sunrise he watched the landing party disembark from their sailing vessel, a three-master whose white aluminium sails and white steel hull stood out against the dark water like chiselled bone. Using binoculars, Halloway immediately identified the ship, a barquentine built by the Garden City administrative council.

Halloway had taken for granted that a rescue party would one day come to search for him. Presumably they had been scouring the shore along the northern coast of the Sound, and had now decided to explore the city itself, no doubt guided there by the sudden efflorescence of light each evening, this neon pleasure-drome that had come to life among the silent tower-blocks.

An hour after dawn Halloway drove north through the city in his squad-car. He left the vehicle half a mile from the landing point and walked ahead through the deserted streets. The white masts and square metal fore-sail of the barquentine rose above the buildings near the quay

where she had docked. There was no rigging – remote-controlled by an in-board computer that assessed tides, course and wind-velocity, the ship was the ultimate in the technology of sail.

Halloway climbed on to the roof of an appliance store and watched the expedition party come ashore. There were ten people in the group, all members of the Garden City gliding club – Halloway recognized the architect and his twelve-year-old son, and the elderly hydrographer with the red beard. As they unloaded their bicycles and wicker hampers they reminded Halloway of a Victorian picnic party exploring a nature reserve. Had he really spent his life with these quiet, civilized and anaemic people? Amused by them, but already bored by the whole absurd business, he watched them adjust their bicycle clips and tyre pressures. Their polite and gentle manners, the timid way in which they gazed down the empty streets, had given him all the ideas he needed on how to deal with them.

As Halloway had guessed, it took the rescue party a full two days to reach the centre of the city. During the mornings they pedalled forward at a sedate pace, cautiously making their way through the abandoned cars and festoons of rusting telephone wire. There were endless pauses to consult their maps and take refreshment. They had even brought a portable recycling unit with them, and carefully reprocessed their kitchen and other wastes. By early afternoon they were already pitching their elaborate tents and laying out their complex camping equipment.

Luckily, it was almost dusk when they finally reached the central square. On the television monitor in the police station Halloway watched them dismount from their bicycles and stare with amazement at Buckmaster's towering monument. Lit by a single floodlight inside the nave the memorial rose above the darkened square, the hundreds of windows and radiator grilles shining like the facets of an immense glowing jewel.

The party edged forward tentatively, gripping their bicycle handlebars for moral support. All around them the streets were dark and silent. Then, as they all bent down to take off their trouser clips, Halloway leaned across his control console and began to throw the switches.

Later, when he looked back on this episode, Halloway relished his routing of the rescue party and only wished that he had recorded it on the traffic control videotape system. For thirty minutes total pandemonium had broken loose in the square and nearby streets. As a hundred generators roared into life, pouring electric current into the grid, arc-lights blazed around the square, freezing his would-be rescuers in their tracks. The façades of the buildings around the square erupted into a cataract of neon. Traffic lights beckoned and signalled. From the loudspeakers which Olds had strung across the streets came a babel of sound – police sirens howling, jet aircraft taking off, trains slamming through junctions, car horns blaring, all the noises of the city in its heyday which Halloway had found in a speciality record shop.

As this visual and acoustic nightmare broke loose around the members of the rescue party, Halloway left the communications room and ran down to the street. As he climbed into his police car Stillman swerved past in his white gangster's limousine. Racing after him, Halloway switched on his siren. He reached the square and hurtled around it, cornering on two wheels in the way approved by the stunt-drivers in the fifty-year-old crime films which Stillman had screened for him in his nightclub that afternoon.

For the next fifteen minutes, as the noise of police sirens and aircraft, machine-gun fire and express trains sounded through the streets, Halloway and Stillman put on their mock car chase, pursuing each other around the square, plunging out of narrow alleys and swerving across the sidewalks, driving the terrified members of the rescue party in front of them. Stillman, inevitably, soon went too far, knocking the bicycles out of their hands and crushing two of the complex machines against a fire hydrant. In fact, Halloway was certain that if they had not turned tail and run at least one member of the party would have been killed.

Abandoning their equipment and sharing the remaining bicycles, it took them less than six hours to reach the ship and set sail. Long after they had gone, when Halloway had switched off the recorded sounds and dimmed the neon lights, Stillman continued to drive around the square in his white limousine, jumping the lights at the traffic intersections, tirelessly wheeling the big car in and out of the alleys and side-streets, as if deranged by this dream-come-true of the violent city.

From the communications room at the police station Halloway watched Stillman's car swerving around the square. Somehow he would have to find a means of containing Stillman before he destroyed everything they had done. Tired out by all the noise and action, Halloway reached forward to switch off the monitor, when he realized that he was no longer the only spectator of Stillman's disturbed driving.

Standing in the portico of a deserted bank, their slim figures almost hidden by the high columns, were two boys in their late teens. Despite the shiny plastic suitcases and their flamboyant shoes and jackets – presumably taken from the stores on the outskirts of the city – Halloway was certain that they had come from one of the pastoral settlements. On their Garden City faces was a childlike expectation, an innocent but clear determination to seize the life of the metropolis.

Switching on the loudspeaker system so that he could talk to them, Halloway picked up the microphone. The first of his people had arrived to take their places in his city.

It had been another successful day. On the television monitor in the police commissioner's office Halloway watched the activity in the avenue below. It was five o'clock in the afternoon, and the rush-hour traffic was beginning to build up. The sidewalks were thronged by more than a dozen pedestrians, leaving their offices and workshops on their way to

the neighbourhood bars and supermarkets. A hundred yards from the station, six cars were blocking an intersection where the lights had failed. Their horns sounded impatiently above the street noise.

Halloway spoke to the desk sergeant in the orderly room. 'Get a man over to the Seventh Avenue intersection. There's a faulty green light holding up the traffic.'

'He's already left, Mr Halloway.'

'Good – if we don't watch it now there'll be chaos in an hour or two.'

These minor breakdowns were a pleasant challenge to Halloway. Even now, as one of Stillman's young men ignored the stuttering red light and the outstretched arm of the police constable, Halloway was in no way annoyed. In a sense, these displays of aggression pleased him, confirming everything he had hoped about the reclamation scheme. The pedestrians in the street below strode along purposefully, pushing past each other with scant courtesy. There was no trace here of good humour and pastoral docility.

In an alleyway facing the station a diesel generator was pumping out dense clouds of sooty smoke. A three-man repair gang recently trained by Olds had emptied the sump oil across the sidewalk, in clear contravention of the local ordinances. But, again, Halloway made no attempt to reprimand them. If anything, he had done what he could to frustrate any efforts to bring in stricter clear-air regulations. Pollution was part of the city, a measure of its health. All the so-called ills that had beset this huge metropolis in its prime had visited themselves with flattering haste on Halloway's small enclave. Pollution, traffic congestion, inadequate municipal services, inflation and deficit public financing had all promptly reappeared.

Halloway had even been pleased when the first crime was committed. During the previous night several clothing stores had been broken into, and pilfering from the supermarkets went on continuously. Halloway had spoken to Stillman about the light-fingered behaviour of his entourage. Lounging back with his young cronies in his 1920s gangster limousine, Stillman had merely flicked the sharp lapels of his dove-grey suit and pointed out that petty crime helped to keep the economy running.

'Relax, Halloway, it's all part of the problem of urban renewal. Do I complain that some of your boys are on the take? You've got to increase turnover. You're working these poor devils so hard they haven't time to spend their pay. If they've got anything left by the end of the week, that is. This is a real high-rent area you've set up for them. Any time now you'll have a housing crisis on your hands, social problems, urban unrest. Remember, Halloway, you don't want to start a flight from the cities.'

Halloway had taken this friendly ribbing in his stride, though the rapid increase in the size of Stillman's gang had begun to make him uneasy. Clearly Stillman relished lording it over this entourage of wide-eyed teenagers and farm-bred youths, fitting them up with their gangster suits

and weapons like a corrupt stage-director playing ironic games with a chorus of young actors. At times Halloway felt that he too was part of this sardonic man's devious entertainment.

However, apart from the stealing, Stillman's continued ravaging of department store windows in the surrounding districts of the city had turned Halloway's neighbourhood into an island of light and activity in an ever-larger sea of devastation. Halloway's plans for expansion had been effectively shelved by this deliberate vandalism, the wholesale destruction of complete city blocks.

In addition, Stillman's entourage had come into collision with Olds, and Halloway now depended more than ever on the mute. Two of Stillman's men had tried to break into Olds' automobile plant, complaining that the models they had ordered from him had not been delivered. For several days Olds had retreated to his rooftop eyrie above the garage at the airport. Without him everything soon began to run down. Halloway drove out to pacify him, and found Olds sitting below the wing of the glider tethered to the roof, calculators flicking in his hands as he brooded to himself. His eyes were gazing at the flights of birds taking off from the reservoirs around the airport, thousands of wild geese moving westwards across the city. Uneasily, Halloway noticed that the cars in his museum were still dusty and untended. One of them, the black Duesenberg, had been savagely attacked, its windows knocked in and upholstery slashed, controls pounded out of recognition by a heavy mallet.

But for a brilliant stroke of Halloway's, Olds would long since have left. Two months beforehand, he had shown his first irritation with the throngs of youths and teenage girls who were entering the reclamation area. Many of them were idealists like Halloway, repressed by the passivity of the garden communities and eager to help re-start the city. However, an equal number were drifters and misfits, who resented taking orders from Olds and began to mimic him, flashing obscenities on the read-out panels of the pocket calculators they had taken from a business-machines store.

Searching for some way of retaining his hold over Olds, Halloway came up with the suggestion that the mute could own and manage his own automobile plant. The idea had immediately appealed to Olds. In an underground garage near the police-station he and his workforce soon constructed a crude but functioning production line, on which the dozens of cars being re-equipped and re-engined moved along a section of railway line. They entered as little more than wrecks picked up off the street by their prospective owners, and emerged at the far end of the line as fully functioning vehicles. Delighted by this, Olds had agreed to stay on in the city.

In fact, Halloway's idea worked better than he hoped. The motor-car was the chief commodity of the city, and demand for it was insatiable. Almost every one of the new inhabitants now owned three or four cars, and their chief recreation was driving around the streets of the reclamation area dressed in the latest finery. Parking problems had become acute, and

a special task force under Olds was renovating the kerbside meters, an unpopular measure grudgingly accepted only because of the special status of the automobile and the important position it occupied, economically and otherwise, in people's lives.

Despite these problems, Halloway was satisfied with his achievement. In the four months since the first of the new arrivals had turned up, a genuine microcosm of the former metropolis had come into existence. The population of the city was now two hundred, girls and youths in their late teens and early twenties, emigrants from Garden City and Parkville, Laurel Heights and Heliopolis, drawn from these dozy pastoral settlements to the harsh neon glare that each evening lit up the night sky like a beacon.

By now any new immigrants – some of them, worryingly, little more than children – were rapidly inducted into urban life. On arrival they were interviewed by Halloway, issued with a list of possible jobs, either on Olds' production line, in the clothing stores and supermarkets, or in any one of a dozen reclamation gangs. The last group, who foraged through the city at large for cars, fuel, food supplies, tools and electrical equipment, in effect represented the productive capacity of the new settlement, but in time Halloway hoped that they would embark on the original manufacture of an ever-wider range of consumer goods. Cash credits (banknotes franked with Halloway's name) were advanced to the new recruits against their first week's pay, with which they could buy the garish clothing, records and cigarettes they seemed to need above all else. Most of the two hundred inhabitants were now heavily in debt, but rather than evict them from their apartments and close the discotheques, bars and amusement arcades where they spent their evenings, Halloway had astutely lengthened the working day from eight to ten hours, enticing them with generous though uneconomic overtime payments. Already, he happily realized, he was literally printing money. Within only a few months inflation would be rampant, but like the crime and pollution this was a real sign of his success, a confirmation of all he had dreamed about.

There was a flicker of interference on the monitor screen, indicating a fault in the camera mounted outside the station. Muttering with mock-annoyance, 'Nothing works any more,' Halloway switched to the camera in the square. The open plaza with its memorial of cars was deserted at this hour. The monument had never been completed. Stillman had long since lost interest in the hard work of construction, and no one else had volunteered, particularly as no payment was involved. Besides, these memorials of cars and radiator grilles, tyres and kitchen appliances created an atmosphere of defeat and fatality, presiding like funeral pyres over the outskirts of the city as the new arrivals pressed on to their promised land.

A few attempts had been made to dismantle the pyramids, but each time Buckmaster and his daughter had managed to make good the damage. Dressed in her ever-changing costumes, in this cavalcade of

Twentieth-Century fashion, Miranda moved tirelessly through the city, seeding the glass-filled streets with poppies and daisies, trailing vines over the fallen telephone wires. Halloway had given two assistants the task of following her around the city and destroying whatever new plants they could find. Too many of the flowers she was now setting out in window boxes and ornamental urns had a distinctly sinister aspect. Halloway had caught her the previous week, eerily at work in the reclamation area itself, bedding out bizarre lilies with nacreous petals and mantis-like flowers in the entrance to the police-station, glamorous but vicious plants that looked as if they might lunge at the throats of anyone passing by. Halloway had pushed past her, overturned her flower trolley and torn out the lilies with his bare hands. Then, with unexpected forbearance, he had ordered his sergeant to drive her back to her hotel. His feelings for Miranda remained as confused as they had been at their first meeting. On the one hand he wanted to impress her, to make her recognize the importance of everything he had done, on the other he was vaguely afraid of this young and naive Diana of the botanical gardens, about to embark on some macabre hunt through the intense, over-heated foliage.

The day after this incident Buckmaster paid Halloway a visit, the first he had made to the reclamation zone. Still keen to earn the old industrialist's approval, Halloway took him on a tour of the neighbourhood, proudly pointing out the mechanics working on the motor-cars on Olds' production line, the gleaming vehicles being collected by their new owners, the system of credit and finance which he had evolved, the busy bars and supermarkets, the new arrivals moving into their refurbished apartments, and even the first two-hour-a-day transmissions from the local television station – the programmes, with complete historical accuracy, consisted entirely of old movies and commercials. The latter, despite a hiatus of thirty years, were still up-to-date advertisements of the products they bought and sold in the stores and supermarkets.

'Everything is here that you can think of, sir,' Halloway told the old man. 'And it's a living urban structure, not a film set. We've got traffic problems, inflation, even the beginnings of serious crime and pollution . . .'

The industrialist smiled at Halloway in a not unkindly way. 'That's a proud boast, Halloway. I'd begun to notice those last two myself. Now, you've taken me on your tour – let me take you on one of mine.'

Reluctant to leave his command post in the commissioner's office, Halloway nonetheless decided to humour Buckmaster. Besides, he knew that in many ways Buckmaster had taken over the role of his own father. Often, as he relaxed in the evenings at his apartment overlooking the park, Halloway seriously wondered if his father would have understood all that he had achieved, so far beyond the antique engine parts and aircraft designs. Unhappily, Buckmaster – who certainly did understand – remained ambiguous in his response.

Together they set off in Halloway's car, driving for over an hour towards the industrial areas to the north-west of the city. Here, among the power

stations and railyards, foundries and coal depots, Buckmaster tried to point out to Halloway how the Twentieth Century had met its self-made death. They stood on the shores of artificial lagoons filled with chemical wastes, drove along canals silvered by metallic scum, across landscapes covered by thousands of tons of untreated garbage, fields piled high with cans, broken glass and derelict machinery.

But as he listened to the old man warning him that sooner or later he would add to these terminal moraines, Halloway had been exhilarated by the scenes around him. Far from disfiguring the landscape, these discarded products of Twentieth-Century industry had a fierce and wayward beauty. Halloway was fascinated by the glimmering sheen of the metal-scummed canals, by the strange submarine melancholy of drowned cars looming up at him from abandoned lakes, by the brilliant colours of the garbage hills, by the glitter of a million cans embedded in a matrix of detergent packs and tinfoil, a kaleidoscope of everything they could wear, eat and drink. He was fascinated by the cobalt clouds that drifted below the surface of the water, free at last of all plants and fish, the soft chemical billows interacting as they seeped from the sodden soil. He explored the whorls of steel shavings, foliage culled from a metallic christmas tree, the bales of rusting wire whose dense copper hues formed a burnished forest in the sunlight. He gazed raptly at the chalky whiteness of old china-clay tips, vivid as powdered ice, abandoned railyards with their moss-covered locomotives, the undimmed beauty of industrial wastes produced by skills and imaginations far richer than nature's, more splendid than any Arcadian meadow. Unlike nature, here there was no death.

Lulled by this vision of technology's Elysian Fields, Halloway sat half-asleep behind the commissioner's desk, dwarfed by the leather-backed chair. When he woke he found that the TV monitor was again showing a jumble of interference patterns. Part of the excitement of city life was the constant breakdown of these poorly designed appliances, and the difficulty of getting hold of a repairman. In Garden City, every piece of equipment, every washing machine and solar-powered kitchen stove, functioned for ever with dismaying perfection. In the rare event of even the smallest malfunction the designer would appear on one's doorstep as fast as his bicycle could carry him. By contrast, the metropolis operated an exciting knife-edge away from total collapse.

Leaving the station, Halloway saluted the two eighteen-year-old policemen sitting in their patrol car. There were ten officers under his command, an over-large proportion of the total number of inhabitants, but all Halloway's scrutiny of the commissioner's records confirmed that a large police force, like pollution and a high crime-rate, was an essential feature of city life.

Besides, they might well be useful sooner than he expected. As he stepped into his car to drive the fifty yards to Olds' garage – Halloway never walked, however short the distance, and often U-turned his car

to get from one side of the road to the other – a gang of teenage boys tumbled with a chorus of obscenities from a nearby amusement arcade. They clustered around a large motorcycle with extended forks and a lavishly chromed engine. All wore black leather jackets strung with sinister ornaments – iron crosses, ceremonial daggers and death's heads. The driver kick-started the machine with a violent roar, then lurched in a circle across the sidewalk, knocking down part of a tobacco kiosk before veering into Halloway's path. Without apology, he drummed his fist on the roof above Halloway's head and roared off down the street, weaving in and out of the shouting pedestrians.

As Halloway expected, most of the workers on Olds' production line had packed up early. The thirty vehicles mounted on their movable trolleys had come to a halt, and the few mechanics left were plugging the batteries into the overnight chargers.

Olds was seated in his glass-walled office, moodily playing with his collection of pocket calculators, slim fingers flicking out fragments of some strange dialogue. As life for him had become increasingly complex, with all the problems of running this automobile plant, he had added more and more calculators. He placed the instruments in a series of lines across his desk, and seemed to be working towards a decision about everything, laying out the elements of this reductive conversation like cards in a game of solitaire.

He gazed up at Halloway, as if recognizing him with difficulty. He looked tired and listless, numbed by his work on all the projects which Halloway pushed forward ruthlessly.

'Olds, it's only six. Why are we scrapping the evening shift?'

There are not enough men for the line.

'They should all be here.' When Olds sat back, shuffling the calculators with one hand, Halloway snapped, 'Olds – they need the work! They've got to pay back their wage credits!'

The mute shrugged, watching Halloway with his passive but intelligent eyes. From a drawer he pulled out his old flying-helmet. He seemed about to question Halloway about something, but changed his mind.

Halloway, they lack your appreciation of the value of hard work.

'Olds, can't you understand?' With an effort, Halloway controlled his exasperation. He paced around the office, deciding on a new tack. 'Listen, Olds, there's something I wanted to bring up with you. As you know, you don't actually pay any rent for this garage – in fact, this whole operation makes no direct contribution at all to the municipal budget. Originally I exempted you because of the help you've given in starting everything up, but I think now we'll have to look into the question of some kind of reasonable rent – and of taxation, too, for that matter.' As Olds' fingers began to race irritatingly across the calculators, flicking out a series of messages he was unable to read, Halloway pressed on.

'There's another thing. So much of life here depends on time – hours of work, rates of pay and so on, they're all hitched to the clock. It occurred

to me that if we lengthened the hour, without anyone knowing, of course, we would get more work out of people for the same rates of pay. Suppose I ordered in all the clocks and wristwatches, for a free check-up, say, could you readjust them so that they ran a little slower?' Halloway paused, waiting to see if Olds fully appreciated the simplicity of this ingenious scheme. He added, 'Naturally, it would be to everyone's benefit. In fact, by varying the length of the hour, by slowing or speeding up all the clocks, we would have a powerful economic regulator, we'd be able to cut back or encourage inflation, vary pay-rates and productivity. I'm looking ahead, I know, but I already visualize a central radio transmitter beaming out a variable time signal to everyone's clock and wristwatch, so that no one need bother about making the adjustments himself . . .'

Halloway waited for a reply, but the calculators were silent for once, their display panels unlit. Olds was looking up at him with an expression Halloway had never seen before. All the mute's intelligence and judgment were in his eyes, staring at this blond-haired young man as if seeing him clearly for the first time.

Annoyed by his almost disdainful attitude, Halloway was tempted to strike the mute. But at that moment, carried clearly above the drumming of the generators, they heard the squeal of tyres in the road above, and the sounds of breaking glass and a child's scream.

When they reached the street a crowd had already gathered, standing around a white limousine that had swerved across the sidewalk and plunged through the windows of a supermarket. Cans and detergent packs, which Halloway had helped to stack into their display pyramids, were scattered among the broken glass. Stillman's chauffeur, a black-jacketed youth of sixteen, stepped from the car, spitting away his gum in a nervous gesture. Everyone was looking down at two eleven-year-old boys, barely conscious, stretched out in the roadway, and at the dead body of a young girl lying under the limousine between its rear wheels.

As the siren of a police car wailed towards them Olds pushed through the crowd. He knelt down and held the girl's bloodied wrist. When he carried her away in his arms, pushing brusquely past Halloway, he held the calculator in one hand. Halloway caught a glimpse of its display panel, screaming out a single silent obscenity.

The next week marked an uneasy interregnum. On the pretext of keeping an eye on everything, Halloway retreated to the commissioner's office, watching the streets for hours on the TV monitor. The death of the girl, the first traffic fatality of the new city, was an event even Halloway was unable to rationalize. He stayed away from the funeral, which was attended by everyone except himself. Olds drove the huge hearse, which he found in a breaker's yard and spent all night refurbishing. Surrounded by an arbour of flowers, the dead child in her lavish hand-carved casket moved away at the head of the procession, followed through the empty streets by all the people of the neighbourhood, everyone at the wheel

of his car. Stillman and his entourage wore their darkest gangster suits. Miranda and old Buckmaster, both in black capes, appeared in an ancient open tourer filled with strange wreaths she had prepared from the flowers that Halloway's men had destroyed.

However, much to Halloway's relief everything soon returned to normal, though by some unhappy paradox this first death set off an even greater latent violence. During the following days more and more workers defected from their jobs to join Stillman's entourage, which by now had swollen to a substantial private army. Many of them wore black para-military uniforms. All day the sound of gunfire echoed through the streets as they destroyed hundreds of the deer in the park, driving away the pheasants, quail and wild duck on which Halloway depended to stock the fresh meat counters of the supermarkets. Armed with rifles, they marched up and down the square in parade order, presenting arms beside the files of slaughtered deer. Stillman, now affecting a military tunic and peaked cap, had swapped his limousine for an open-topped half-track, in which he stood to attention, taking the salute.

Halloway tried to laugh off these absurd games as another mental aberration of this convicted murderer, but Stillman's men had begun to disrupt the life of the zone. They strolled in gangs around the supermarkets, helping themselves to whatever they wanted and brushing aside any requests for payment. Taking their cue from this, many of the apartment-house tenants defaulted on their rents. Instead of shopping at the supermarkets, and helping to bolster the faltering economy of the zone, they were breaking into the stores outside the area. Each day there was a further slide towards anarchy, the failure of another generator, an increase in traffic delays and parking offences, and above all a growing conviction that the city was unmanageable.

Faced with this collapse of his dream, worked for with such effort, Halloway decided to reassert his authority. He needed some means of inspiring these new urban dwellers. Bored by their long hours of repetitive work, most of them did no more in their leisure time than hang around the bars and amusement arcades, driving aimlessly around the streets in their various cars. The influx of new arrivals had begun to fall off, and already the first of the original settlers were packing their bags and drifting off to the suburbs.

After a night of continuous uproar, filled with the sound of sirens and gunfire, Halloway decided to enlist Buckmaster's help. The old industrialist was the only person he could fall back on. Olds no longer spoke to him – the whole make-believe of teaching the mute to fly had long since lost its credibility. But Buckmaster had been one of the pioneers who created the Twentieth Century, and might well be able to charge everyone with enthusiasm again.

Outside Buckmaster's hotel Halloway hesitated before stepping from his car. His ruthless use of defoliants on Miranda's plant kingdom

made him uneasy about seeing her, but he would have to brush this aside.

As he climbed the steps to the hotel entrance he noticed that the revolving door had been converted into a miniature greenhouse. Each of the segments was filled with an unfamiliar plant, with purple flowers and purple-black berries. With a reflex of irritation, Halloway was about to rip them out with his hands, but a brief movement on a balcony above him caught his eye.

Three floors above, Miranda was standing on her balcony and looking down at Halloway, a posy of mantis lilies in her hand. She was wearing a long white dress and white lace veil that Halloway had never seen before, but which he recognized immediately. Gazing up at her, and knowing that she had never been more beautiful, Halloway was suddenly convinced that she was wearing the wedding gown for him. She was waiting for Halloway to come and collect her from the hotel, and then they would cross the square to the cathedral of cars where her father would marry them.

As if to confirm this, Miranda leaned slightly over her balcony, smiling at Halloway and beckoning to him with a white-gloved hand.

When he reached the revolving door the purple flowers and dark berries clustered thickly around him. He was about to push past them when he remembered the posy of lilies in her hand, and the too-eager way in which she had watched him arrive. Then he realized that the plants he was about to brush out of his way, festering here in this glass execution chamber between himself and his bride, were deadly nightshade.

In the early afternoon Miranda and her father left the city for good.

That night, as he lay asleep in his apartment, Halloway dreamed that he was standing at an open window overlooking the park. Below him the waist-high grass shivered and seethed. Some deep motion had unsettled the ground, a profound shudder that crossed the entire park. The bushes and brambles, the trees and shrubs, even the lowliest weeds and wild flowers, were beginning to rustle and quiver, straining from the ground. Everywhere branches were waving in an invisible wind, leaves beating at the passing air. Then, by the lake at the centre of the park, a miniature oak broke free, boughs moving like the wings of an ungainly bird. Shaking the earth from its roots, it soared towards Halloway, a hundred feet from the ground. Other trees were following, branches grasping at the air, a million leaves whirling together. As Halloway watched, gripping the window-sill to stop himself from joining them, the whole park suddenly rose upwards, every tree and flower, every blade of grass joining to form an immense sunlit armada that circled above Halloway's head and soared along the rays of the sun. As they moved away across the sky Halloway could see that all over the city the flowers and vines which Miranda had planted were also leaving. A flight of poppies soared past, a crimson carpet followed by an aerial causeway of daisies, petals beating as if they were the cilia of some huge lace-like creature. Halloway looked up from the city, with

its now barren stone and dying air. The sky was filled with a legion of flying creatures, a green haze of petals and blossoms free at last to make their way to the welcoming sun.

When he woke the next morning, Halloway went out on to his balcony, uncertain whether the dense vegetation rooted securely to the ground was an illusion of his mind. Later, when he paused briefly at the police station, the vision of these flying oaks and marigolds, elms and daisies still hung in the air, brighter than the neon façades of the bars and amusement arcades.

Instead of switching off the lights and going to work, people were hanging around the doorways of the bars, watching Halloway across the pintables in the arcades. None of the police force had turned up for duty, and for a moment Halloway felt that the day itself had failed to appear.

Determined now on a confrontation with Stillman, he went back to his car. He was convinced that the former convict was responsible for the collapse of everything he had worked for. Stillman had been drawn here by the limitless opportunities he had seen for cruelty and disruption. He needed a dying city, not a living one, a warm cadaver that he could infest like a maggot.

After locking the police station, Halloway drove along the park to Stillman's headquarters, a cylindrical art museum with a single spiral ramp that circled upwards to Stillman's audience chamber. Armed guards lounged in their black uniforms around the line of armoured limousines parked outside. They signalled Halloway forward, clearly expecting him. As Halloway walked towards the elevator Stillman was standing in a theatrical pose on the topmost stage.

Their meeting never took place. Halfway up, the elevator stopped with an abrupt shudder, its lights failing. Everywhere voices began to shout, a shot was fired, feet raced past down the ramp. By the time Halloway broke free from the elevator he was the last to leave the darkened building. Stillman and his gang had set off, taking Halloway's car with them.

When he reached the police-station half an hour later an electrical storm was sweeping the streets of the reclamation zone. Cars were stalled bumper to bumper at the intersections. The drivers stood by their vehicles, flinching from the neon signs that were exploding in cascades of molten glass above the bars and restaurants. Everywhere the overloaded circuitry was burning out. Coloured light-bulbs burst and ripped across the ceilings of the amusement arcades. Pintables exploded in a chatter of free games, in the supermarkets the first fires were lifting from the freezer cabinets, flames roasting the carcasses of the deer and wild-fowl. The noise of a hundred generators filled the air, turned up by someone to their greatest output.

It took Halloway several hours to restore order. Long before he had turned down the last of the overheated generators, replaced the fuses

and put out the most serious of the fires, Halloway knew who had been responsible. Dozens of the pocket calculators lay around the generators in the alleyways and basements, display panels glowing dimly. Olds must have ransacked the business-machine stores, gathering together as many calculators as he could find to cope with his mental crisis. They were scattered in his trail, spinning off from his hyper-active mind.

Wings?

Mixture rich, carburettor heat cold.

Sparrow, wren, robin, hummingbird . . .

Halloway stared down angrily at these fragmentary messages, bulletins to himself that expressed Olds' doubts and anxieties. When Halloway found him he would scream him into submission with one potent word, throw him into a final fit from which he would never recover.

Kiwi, penguin?

Pitch full fine, fuel cocks open.

Starling, swallow, swift . . .

Halloway stamped on the calculators, pulverizing this ascending order of birds. Exhausted by the effort of shutting down the generators, he sat on the floor in the supermarket basement, surrounded by soup cans and the glowing dials.

Climbing.

Flaps down, throttle slightly cracked.

Elizabeth, dead child. No pain.

Blue eyes. Insane.

Partridge, quail, geese, oriole . . . eagle, osprey, falcon . . .

Guessing that he might find the mute in his automobile plant, Halloway ran down the ramp into the basement. But Olds had gone. In a last galvanic spasm, the thirty cars on the production line had been hurled against the concrete wall, and lay heaped across each other in a tangle of chrome and broken glass. On the desk in his office the calculators were laid out neatly to form a last message.

Ol

Old

Olds

Oldsm

Oldsmo

Oldsmob

Oldsmobi

Oldsmobil

OLDSMOBILE!!!

And then, in the drawer where he had kept his antique flying-helmet:

I can –!

Fulmar, albatross, flamingo, frigate-bird, condor . . .

IGNITION!

* * *

Abandoning his car, Halloway walked through the empty streets, littered with smouldering neon tubes as if a burnt-out rainbow had collapsed across the sidewalks. Already he could see that everyone had gathered in the square, their backs turned to Buckmaster's memorial. They were looking up at the display sign on the newspaper building, the brief message which Olds had left for them repeating itself in a cry of fear, pride and determination.

I CAN FLY! I CAN FLY! I CAN FLY! I CAN FLY!

By the time Halloway reached the airport the siege was well under way. Stillman and his men surrounded the car park, crouching behind their limousines and firing at random at the upper floors. There were no signs of Olds, but from the apex of the pyramid of radiator grilles Halloway could see that the powered glider on the roof had been readied for flight. Olds had fitted an undercarriage and tail-wheel to the craft. No longer tethered, it had been moved to the upper end of the canted roof, the two hundred yards of concrete sloping away below the polished propeller.

Under cover of a fusillade of shots, Stillman and three of his men rushed the building and entered the ground floor of the car park. Ten storeys above them, Olds appeared on the roof, dressed in his antique flying-suit, leather jacket and gaiters. He moved around the aircraft, making some last adjustments to the engine, oblivious of the shooting below.

Twenty minutes later, smoke began to rise from the eighth floor of the car park, dark billows that lifted towards the roof. Seeing the smoke, Olds stopped and watched it swirl around him. Then, above the sound of gunshots and exploding fuel tanks, Halloway heard the clatter of the aero-engine. The propeller span briskly, pumping the heavy smoke out of its way.

Knowing that Olds would be killed if he tried to take off, Halloway ran towards the car park. Shouting at Stillman's men, he pushed past them to the emergency stairs.

When he reached the eighth floor one of the young guards held him back. At the far end of the sloping concrete floor Olds had built a solid barricade with his four land-cruisers. Unable to climb past it, and with the remainder of the stairway blocked by a pile of generators and electrical equipment, Stillman and his men were setting fire to the cars, shooting into the engine compartments and fuel tanks of these once-cherished sedans and limousines.

'Stillman!' Halloway shouted. 'Let him go! If he tries to fly he'll kill himself!'

But Stillman waved him away. Two of the cars were burning briskly, and he and his men pushed the flaming vehicles up the slope and rammed them into the land-cruisers. Within moments the metal cabins were splitting in the fierce heat. Watching this conflagration begin, Stillman beckoned his men down the slope.

Then, moving down the gutter below the internal balustrade, came a

thin stream of fluid, working its way around the old tyres and the piles of leaves and birds' nests. Thinking that this was Olds' pathetic attempt to douse the fire Stillman had started, Halloway grappled with the guard, trying to wrest the shotgun from him. As they struggled together by the staircase he saw that the stream had expanded into a broad sheet, as wide as the sloping floor, moving swiftly like a tidal race. It swilled below the land-cruisers and around the wheels of the burning cars, touched here and there by the nimbus of a flame. The fluid overran Stillman's feet as he and his men turned and ran for their lives, splashing through the fast-moving sluice. In the last seconds, as the whole floor lit up in a sudden bloom of flame, illuminating the running figures trapped in the centre of this sloping furnace, Halloway hurled himself down the staircase. The sounds of explosions followed him to the ground floor.

So Olds had opened the stopcocks on the fuel tanks of the cars on the ninth and tenth floors. When Halloway reached the road the upper three storeys of the garage were aflame. Powerful explosions were ripping apart the limousines, sports-cars and open tourers that Olds had collected so carefully. Window glass and pieces of sharp chrome flicked through the air, landing on the sidewalk around him as he crouched behind an airline van. Fifty feet high, the flames of the burning gasolene rose into a sluggish tower of smoke two hundred yards in diameter.

Most of Stillman's men had driven off, these youths in their black uniforms and large cars frightened by the violence of the explosions. Three others had remained behind, waiting with their rifles raised, but Halloway was certain that both Olds and Stillman had already died.

High above him, a propeller whirled through the smoke. The sailplane moved across the roof, lining itself up for take-off. Olds' slim figure was crouched in the cockpit, face hidden by the antique helmet. The engine deepened its roar, and the aircraft with its long drooping wings sped forward down the sloping roof. As it left the building and sailed into the open air it seemed to fall towards the ground, but its wings suddenly climbed on to the light wind crossing the airport. It soared along, engine blaring, a few feet above the cars parked nose-to-tail down the runway, and shook off the oily smoke that still wreathed its wings and fuselage. It flew on steadily, gaining altitude as it cleared the perimeter fence. Moving northwards towards the Sound, it made a careful left-hand turn, three hundred feet above the ground. It set off across the river, wings rocking as Olds tested the controls. Halfway across the river it picked up a flight of wild duck which were circling the city, and then joined a stream of petals half a mile long that was being carried away by the wind. Together, the three flights – the wild duck and the stream of petals, and Olds in his sailplane – flew on to the north-west, parting company when they crossed the ruined suspension bridge. Halloway waited as the sailplane, little more than a point of light reflected from its propeller, climbed higher into the secure sky, and finally vanished on its way westwards across the continent.

* * *

When he had driven back to the city Halloway left his car in the square. Standing beside Buckmaster's memorial, he watched the supermarkets and stores, the bars and amusement arcades close themselves down. Almost everyone had left now, as the young people made their way back to their garden settlements.

Halloway waited until they had all gone. The last of the generators had run out of fuel, dimming the lights in the police-station. He walked through the streets, picking his way over the broken glass and burnt-out cables, past dozens of abandoned cars. Discarded banknotes, printed with his own name, drifted along the roadway.

In the space of only a few months he had managed to achieve what had taken this metropolis as a whole more than a hundred and fifty years to do. However, it had all been worthwhile. He knew now that he would never return to Garden City, with its pastoral calm. In the morning, after he had rested, he would set off on foot, searching for Olds and the sailplane, following the memorials westwards across the continent, until he found the old man again and could help him raise his pyramids of washing machines, radiator-grilles and typewriters. Somehow he would come to terms with Miranda, and help her to re-forest the cities. Maybe, then, she would wear her wedding dress again for him.

Confident of all this, Halloway set off across the square. Already he was planning the first of a series of huge metal pyramids in his mind, as high perhaps as these skyscrapers, built of airliners, freight trains, walking draglines and missile launchers, larger than anything of which Buckmaster and the Twentieth Century had ever dreamed. And perhaps, too, Olds would teach him how to fly.

1976

THE DEAD TIME

Without warning, as if trying to confuse us, the Japanese guarding our camp had vanished. I stood by the open gates of the camp with a group of fellow-internees, staring in an almost mesmerized way at the deserted road and at the untended canals and paddy-fields that stretched on all sides to the horizon. The guard-house had been abandoned. The two Japanese sentries who usually waved me away whenever I tried to sell them cigarettes had given up their posts and fled with the remainder of the military police to their barracks in Shanghai. The tyre-prints of their vehicles were still clearly visible in the dust between the gate-posts.

Perhaps even this hint at the presence of Japanese who had imprisoned us for three years was enough to deter us from crossing the line into the silent world outside the camp. We stood together in the gateway, trying to straighten our shabby clothing and listening to the children playing in the compound. Behind the nearest of the dormitory blocks several women were hanging out their morning's washing, as if fully content to begin another day's life in the camp. Yet everything was over!

Although the youngest of the group – I was then only twenty – on an impulse I casually stepped forward and walked into the centre of the road. The others watched me as I turned to face the camp. Clearly they half-expected a shot to ring out from somewhere. One of them, a consultant engineer who had known my parents before the war separated us, raised his hand as if to beckon me to safety.

The faint drone of an American aircraft crossed the empty bank of the river half a mile away. It flew steadily towards us, no more than a hundred feet above the paddy-fields, the young pilot sitting forward over his controls as he peered down at us. Then he rolled his wings in a gesture of greeting and altered course for Shanghai.

Their confidence restored, the others were suddenly around me, laughing and shouting as they set off down the road. Six hundred yards away was a Chinese village, partly hidden by the eroded humps of the burial mounds built on the earth causeways that separated the paddies. Already substantial supplies of rice beer had been brought back to the camp. For all our caution, we were not the first of the internees to leave the camp. A week earlier, immediately after the news of the Japanese capitulation, a party of merchant seamen had climbed through the fence behind their block and walked the eight miles to Shanghai. There they had been picked up by the Japanese gendarmerie, held for two days and returned to the

camp in a badly beaten state. So far all the others who had reached Shanghai – whether, like myself, searching for relations, or trying to check up on their businesses – had met with the same fate.

As we strode towards the village, now and then looking back at the curious perspectives of the camp receding behind us, I watched the paddies and canals on either side of the road. In spite of everything I had heard on the radio broadcasts, I was still not certain that the war was over. During the past year we had listened more or less openly to the various radios smuggled into the camp, and had followed the progress of the American forces across the Pacific. We had heard detailed accounts of the atom-bomb attacks – Nagasaki was little more than 500 miles from us – and of the Emperor's call for capitulation immediately after. But at our camp, eight miles to the east of Shanghai at the mouth of the Yangtse, little had changed. Large numbers of American aircraft crossed the sky unopposed, no longer taking part in any offensive action, but we soon noticed that none had landed at the military airfield adjacent to our camp. Dwindling but still substantial numbers of Japanese troops held the landscape, patrolling the airfield perimeter, the railway lines and roads to Shanghai. Military police continued to guard the camp, as if guaranteeing our imprisonment through whatever peace might follow, and kept little more than their usual distance from the two thousand internees. Paradoxically, the one positive sign was that since the Emperor's broadcast no food had arrived for us.

Hunger, in fact, was my chief reason for leaving the camp. In the confusion after Pearl Harbor I had been separated from my parents by the Japanese occupation authorities and imprisoned in a stockade in the centre of Shanghai reserved for male allied nationals. Eighteen months later, when the American bombing began, the stockade was closed and the prisoners scattered at random among the cluster of large camps for families with children in the countryside surrounding Shanghai. My parents and young sister had spent the war in another of these some twenty miles to the west of the city. Although their condition was probably as bad as my own I was convinced that once I reached them everything would be well.

'It looks as if they're gone. They must have cleared out with everything overnight.'

At the entrance to the village the man next to me, a garage owner from Shanghai, pointed to the abandoned houses. Catching our breath after the brisk walk, we gazed down at the empty alleys and shuttered windows. Not a Chinese was in sight, though only the previous afternoon they had been doing a profitable trade with groups of internees from the camp, bartering rice beer for watches, shoes and fountain pens.

While the others conferred, I wandered away to the ruins of a ceramics factory on the outskirts of the village. Perhaps under the impression that its kilns were some sort of military installation, the Americans had bombed the factory again and again. A few of the buildings were still standing, but

the courtyards were covered with thousands of pieces of broken crockery. Uncannily, these seemed to have been sorted out into various categories of table-ware. I walked across a carpet of porcelain soup spoons, all too aware of the fact that the only noise in this entire landscape was coming from my feet.

For the villagers to have left so suddenly, after all their struggles through the war, could only mean that they were frightened of something they were sure would take place in their immediate locality. During the past year they had attached themselves to our camp, selling a few eggs through the barbed wire and later, when they themselves began to be hungry, trying to break through the fences in order to steal the tomatoes and root-crops which the internees grew on every square foot of vacant soil. At one time we had recruited the Japanese guards to help us strengthen the wire to keep out these pilferers. In the last months the circle of starving or ailing older villagers planted outside the camp gates – none were ever admitted, let alone fed – grew larger every day.

Yet for some reason they had all gone. As I walked back from the factory perimeter my companions were discussing the best route across the paddy-fields to Shanghai. They had ransacked several of the houses and were now sitting on the piles of broken crockery with bottles of rice beer. I remembered the rumours we had heard that before they surrendered the Japanese planned to slaughter their civilian prisoners.

I looked back along the road to the camp, aware of its curious confusion of vulnerability and security. The water-tower and three-storey concrete blocks seemed to rise from the lines of burial mounds. The camp had been a Chinese middle school. We had arrived after dark, and I had never seen it from the outside before, just as I had never physically entered the empty landscape surrounding the camp which had been an intimate part of my life all these years.

I listened to my companions' increasingly random discussion. Apart from the consultant engineer and the garage owner, there were two Australian seamen and a hotel barman. Already I was certain that they had no idea of the hazards facing them, and that as long as I remained with them I would never reach my parents. Their one intention was to get drunk in as many as possible of the dozens of villages between here and Shanghai.

Five minutes after I left them, however, as I walked back along the road to the camp, I heard the sounds of a Japanese military truck coming behind me from the village. Armed soldiers of the gendarmerie leaned on the cabin above the driver, guarding my five former companions who sat on the floor on either side of the tail-gate. Their faces had an ashen and toneless look, like those of men woken abruptly from sleep. Alone of them, an Australian seaman glanced up from his bound wrists and stared at me, as if failing to recognize who I was.

I continued to walk towards the camp, but the truck stopped in front of me. None of the soldiers spoke or even beckoned me to climb

aboard, and already I knew that we were not being given a lift back to the camp.

Without thinking, I had a sudden presentiment of death, not of my own but of everyone else around me.

For the next three days we were held in the gendarmerie barracks attached to the military airfield, where some hundred or so allied aircrew shot down during the air attacks on Shanghai had been concentrated in an attempt to dissuade the American bombers from strafing the hangars and runways. To my relief, we were not mistreated. The Japanese sat around listlessly, no longer interested in us and gazing up in a melancholy way at the American aircraft which endlessly crossed the sky. Already supplies were being parachuted into our camp. From the window of our cell we could see the coloured canopies falling past the water-tower.

Clearly the war was over, and when a gendarmerie sergeant released us from the cell and ordered us into the barracks square I took for granted that we were about to be turned loose at the airfield gates. Instead, we were put aboard the same truck that had brought us here and driven under guard to the nearby railway station that served as a military depot on the Shanghai-Nanking line.

The first to jump down from the truck, I looked around at the ruined station buildings, well aware that the last train had stopped here some two months beforehand. Apart from the aircraft overhead, the landscape remained as deserted as it had been on the day of our abortive escape. On all sides was the debris of war – rusting trucks, a paddy-field used as a dump for worn-out tyres, a line of tank ditches half-filled with water that ran towards a small football stadium set back from the road, a blockhouse covered with leaking sandbags built at the entrance to the station. But the Chinese had gone, vacating the landscape as if at last deciding to leave us to our own resources, to whatever pointless end we cared to make.

'It looks as if we're going to play soccer,' one of the Australian seamen called back to the others as he and I followed the three guards towards the stadium.

'Some stunt for the Red Cross,' someone else commented. 'Afterwards, make sure they take us back to the camp.'

But already I could see into the stadium, and had realized that whatever else took place, we would not be playing football. We climbed the concrete entrance tunnel into the ground, a circle of yellowing grass in the centre of which two trucks were parked. Sections of the empty stand had been used by the Japanese as a warehouse, and several soldiers patrolled the seats high above us, guarding what seemed to be a pile of looted furniture. A party of smartly uniformed military stood by the two trucks, waiting for us to approach. At their head was a young Eurasian interpreter in a white shirt.

As we walked towards them we looked down at the ground at our feet. Stretched out on the frayed grass were some fifty corpses, laid out in neat

rows as if arranged with great care and devotion. All were fully dressed and lay with their feet towards us, arms at their sides, and I could see from the bright pallor of their faces that these people, whoever they were, had only recently died. I paused by a young nun wearing a full habit and wimple whose broad mouth had only just begun to take on its death grimace. Around her, like the members of her flock, were three children, heads to one side as if they had fallen asleep before death.

Watched by the Japanese soldiers and the young interpreter, and by the sentries guarding the furniture in the stands, we walked slowly past the corpses. Apart from two middle-aged Chinese, a man and a woman lying next to each other who might have been husband and wife, all were European and American, and from the worn state of their shoes and clothing seemed to be internees like ourselves. I passed a large ruddy-haired man in brown shorts with a gun-shot wound in his chest, and an elderly woman in a print dress who had been shot in the jaw, but at first sight none of the other bodies revealed any signs of violence.

Twenty feet ahead of me one of the Japanese soldiers by the trucks had moved his rifle. Behind me my companions stepped back involuntarily. The garage owner stumbled against me, for a moment holding my shoulder. I listened to the sound of an American aircraft overhead, the noise of its engine magnified by the concrete bowl of the stadium. It seemed insane that we would be shot here ten days after the war had ended in full view of our rescuers, but already I was convinced that we would not die. Yet again I had that same presentiment of death I had inexplicably felt before our arrest.

One of the Japanese officers, wearing full uniform under a short rain-cape, spoke briefly. I noticed that he was standing beside a small card-table on which rested two wicker baskets containing bottles of saki and parcels of boiled rice wrapped in leaves. For some bizarre reason I assumed that he was about to give me a prize.

The Eurasian in the white shirt came up to me. His face had the same passivity of the Japanese. No doubt he realized that once the Kuomintang forces arrived his own life would be over, like those of the fifty people lying on the stadium grass.

'You're all right?' he asked me. After a pause, he nodded at the Japanese officer. Then, almost as an afterthought, he said, 'You can drive a truck?'

'Yes . . .' The presence of the armed Japanese made any other answer pointless. In fact I had not driven any vehicle since the outbreak of war, and before that only my father's Plymouth car.

'Of course we can.' The garage owner had pulled himself together and joined us. He looked back at our four companions, who were now separated from us by the tract of corpses. 'We can both drive, I'm an experienced mechanic. Who are all those people? What happened to them?'

'We need two drivers,' the interpreter said. 'You know the Protestant cemetery at Soochow?'

'No, but we can find it.'

'That's good. It's only sixty miles, four hours, then you can go free. You take these people to the Protestant cemetery.'

'All right.' The garage owner had again held my shoulder, this time to prevent me changing my mind, though I already had no intention of doing so. 'But who are they all?'

The interpreter seemed to have lost interest. Already the Japanese soldiers were lowering the tail-gates of the trucks. 'Various things,' he said, patting his white shirt. 'Some illnesses, the American planes . . .'

An hour later we had loaded the fifty corpses on to the two trucks and after a trial circuit of the stadium had set off in the direction of Soochow.

Looking back on those first few hours of freedom as we drove together across the empty landscape fifteen miles to the south-east of Shanghai, I am struck by the extent to which we had already forgotten the passengers whose destination had made that freedom possible. Of course neither Hodson, the garage owner, nor myself had the slightest intention of driving to Soochow. As I could see from his manner as the six of us loaded the last of the corpses on to his truck, his one ambition was to turn right on the first road to Shanghai and abandon the truck and its contents in a side street – or, conceivably, given a sudden access of humanity, outside the Swiss embassy. In fact, my chief fear was that Hodson might leave me to be picked up by a Japanese patrol before I had mastered the truck's heavy steering and gear-box.

Luckily we had all been so exhausted by the effort of loading the bodies that the Japanese had not noticed my fumbling efforts to start and control the truck, and within half an hour I was able to keep a steady fifty yards behind Hodson. Both vehicles were plastered with military stickers pasted to the windshields and fenders, presumably assuring our passage through whatever Japanese units we might meet. Twice we passed a platoon sitting with its packs and rifles on the railway line, waiting for a train that would never come, but otherwise the landscape was deserted, not a single Chinese visible. Circumspectly, though, Hodson followed the route to Soochow marked on the road-map given to us by the Eurasian interpreter.

For myself, I was content to make this circuit of Shanghai, as I had no wish to drive the truck with its cargo of corpses through the centre of the city on my way to my parents' camp. Once I had cleared the western suburbs of the city I would turn north off the Soochow road, hand the vehicle over to the first allied command post – our new-found freedom had convinced me that the war would finally be over by the afternoon – and complete the short journey to my parents' camp on foot.

The prospect of seeing them, after all these years, within literally a few hours made me feel light-headed. During the three days in the gendarmerie barracks we had been given almost nothing to eat, and I now picked at the boiled rice in the wicker basket on the seat beside

me. Even the sight of the corpses whose feet and faces were shaking loose beneath the tarpaulin of Hodson's truck did nothing to spoil my appetite. As I had lifted the bodies on to the two trucks I had immediately noticed how well-fleshed most of them were, far better fed than any of us had been in our camp. Presumably they had been imprisoned in some special internment centre, and had unluckily fallen foul of the American air-attacks.

At the same time the absence, with few exceptions, of any wounds or violence suggested one or two unsettling alternatives – plague, perhaps, or some sudden epidemic. Steering the truck with one hand and eating my rice with the other, I eased my foot off the heavy accelerator, opening the interval slightly between Hodson and myself. But for all this I was hardly concerned about the bodies. Too many people had already died in and around our camp. The business of loading the corpses into the trucks had placed a certain mental distance between them and myself. Handling all those bodies, pulling on the stiffening arms and legs, pushing their buttocks and shoulders over the tail-gates, had been like an extended wrestling match with a party of strangers, a kind of forced intimacy that absolved me from all future contact or obligation.

An hour after leaving the stadium, when we had covered some ten miles, Hodson began to slow down, his truck bumping over the rutted road surface at little more than walking pace. Some half a mile from the river, we had entered a landscape flooded by a slack, brown water. Untended canals and drowned paddies stretched away on all sides, and the road had become little more than a series of narrow causeways. The vanished peasants had built their burial mounds into the shoulders of the road, and the ends of the cheap coffins protruded like drawers from the rain-washed earth, lockers ransacked by the passing war. Across the paddies I could see a boom of scuttled freighters that blocked the river, funnels and bridge-houses emerging from the swollen tide. We passed another abandoned village, and then the green shell of a reconnaissance aircraft shot down by the Americans.

Ten feet in front of me, Hodson's truck bumped along the roadway, the heads of his corpses nodding vigorously like sleepers assenting in some shared dream. Then Hodson stopped and jumped down from his cabin.

He laid the map across the bonnet of my truck, then pointed along the broad canal we had been following for the past ten minutes. 'We've got to cross this before we reach the main road. Somewhere up ahead there's a sluice-bridge. It looks too small to have been bombed.'

With his strong hands he began to tear away the stickers pasted to the fenders and windshield of my truck. Though gaunt and undernourished, he looked strong and aggressive. The experience of driving a vehicle again had clearly restored his confidence. I could see that he had been helping himself liberally to his bottle of saki.

He bent down under the tail-gate of his truck and felt the left inside tyre. I had noticed the vehicle tilting when we first reached the canal.

'Going soft – no damn spares either.' He stood up and gazed into the rear of the truck, and with a single sweep of one arm flung back the tarpaulin, like a customs official exposing a suspicious cargo. Nodding to himself, he stared at the bodies piled across each other.

'Right, we rest here and finish the food, then find this bridge. First, let's make things easier for ourselves.'

Before I could speak he had reached into the truck and seized one of the corpses by the shoulders. He jerked it away from its companions and hurled it head-first into the canal. That of a freckle-skinned man in his early thirties, it surfaced within a few seconds in the brown water and slowly drifted away past the reeds.

'Right, we'll have the nun next.' As he hauled her out he shouted over his shoulder, 'You get on with yours. Leave a few behind just in case.'

Ten minutes later, as we sat with our bottles of saki on the bank of the canal, some twenty of the corpses were in the water, moving slowly away from us in the sluggish current. Pulling them down had almost exhausted me, but the first sips of the saki bolted through my bloodstream, almost as intoxicating as the boiled rice I had eaten. The brusque way in which we had ridded ourselves of our passengers no longer unsettled me – though, curiously, as I stood by the tail-gate pulling the bodies on to the ground I had found myself making some kind of selection. I had kept back the three children and a middle-aged woman who might have been their mother, and thrown into the water the Chinese couple and the elderly woman with the jaw-wound. However, all this meant nothing. What mattered was to reach my parents. It was clear to me that the Japanese had not been serious about our delivering the bodies to the Protestant cemetery at Soochow – the two nuns exposed this as no more than a ruse, relieving them of some local embarrassment before the Americans landed at the airfield.

Hodson was asleep beside his truck. His saki bottle followed the corpses down the canal. After throwing a few stones at it, I passed the next hour watching the vapour trails of the American aircraft and thinking with increasing optimism about the future, and about seeing my parents and sister later that afternoon. We would move back to our house in the French concession. My father would re-open his brokerage business, and no doubt train me as his assistant. After years of war and privation, Shanghai would be a boom city again . . . everything would once again return to normal.

This pleasant reverie sustained me, when Hodson had woken blearily and clambered back into his cabin, as we set off in our lightened trucks. I was beginning to feel hungry again, and regretted eating all my rice, particularly as Hodson had thrown his into the canal. But then I heard Hodson shout something back to me. He was pointing to the sluice-bridge a hundred yards in front of us.

When we reached it we found that we were not the only ones hoping to make the crossing.

Parked on the approaches to the bridge, its light machine-gun unguarded,

was a camouflaged Japanese patrol car. As we stopped, the three-man crew had climbed on to the bridge and were trying to close the gates that would carry us across. Seeing us arrive, the sergeant in charge walked over to us, scanning the few stickers Hodson had not torn from our trucks. We stepped down from the cabins, waiting as the sergeant inspected our cargoes without comment. He spoke a few words in Japanese to Hodson, and beckoned us over to the bridge.

As we looked down at the sluices, we could see immediately what had blocked the bridges and prevented the gates from closing. Humped together against the vents were well over a dozen of the corpses that Hodson and I had pitched into the canal an hour earlier. They lay together like mattresses, arms and legs across each other, some face down, others staring at the sky.

To my shock I realized that I recognized each of them. That presentiment of death – though not my own nor of these drowned creatures – which I had felt so often during the past days returned to me, and I looked round at Hodson and the three Japanese as if expecting them immediately to fulfil this unconscious need.

'Well, what do they want?' Hodson was arguing aggressively with the Japanese sergeant, who for some reason was shouting at me in a suddenly high-pitched voice. Perhaps he realized that I might respond to his instructions for reasons of my own. I looked at his face and angular shoulders, wrists that were little more than sticks, well aware that he was as hungry as myself.

'I think they want us to get them out,' I said to Hodson. 'Otherwise, we can't get across. They know we threw them into the water.'

'For God's sake . . .' Exasperated, Hodson pushed past the Japanese and clambered down the bank of the canal. Waist-deep among the corpses, he began to sort them out with his strong arms. 'Aren't they going to help?' he called up in an aggrieved way when the Japanese made no effort to move.

Needless to say, Hodson and I were obliged to lift the bodies out ourselves. They lay on the bank like a party of exhausted bathers, in a strange way almost refreshed by their journey down the canal. The blood had been washed from the jaw-wound of the elderly woman, and I could see for the first time the image of a distinct personality. The sunlight lit the line of moist faces, illuminating the exposed hands and ankles.

'Well, we can get across now.' Looking down at his drenched trousers as the Japanese closed the sluice-gates, Hodson said to me 'Let's get on with it. We'll leave them here.'

I was staring at the face of the elderly woman, visualizing her talking to me, perhaps about her childhood in England or her long missionary years in Tientsin. Beside her the washed robes of the young nun had an almost spectral blackness, which gave her white hands and face an extraordinary glow. I was about to join Hodson when I noticed that the Japanese were also gazing at the bodies. All I could see was

their intense hunger, as if they were eager to become my passengers.

'I think we should put them back on the trucks,' I said to Hodson. Fortunately, before he could remonstrate with me the sergeant had come over to us, beckoning us to work with his pistol.

Hodson helped me to load the first ten bodies on to the back of my truck. Then, unable to contain his anger any more, he seized the bottle of saki from the cabin, pushed past the Japanese and climbed into his truck. Shouting something at me, he drove on to the bridge and set off along the opposite bank of the canal.

For the next half hour I continued to load my vehicle, pausing to rest for a few minutes after I had carefully stowed each of the bodies. The effort of dragging them up the bank and lifting them into the truck almost exhausted me, and when I had finished I sat numbly for ten minutes behind my steering wheel. As I started the engine and drove on to the bridge with my heavy cargo the Japanese watched me without comment.

Fortunately, my anger at Hodson soon revived me. I clenched the wheel tightly in both hands, forehead touching the windshield, as the overladen vehicle lumbered down the uneven canal road. To have taken my saki mattered nothing, but to leave me with more than my fair share of corpses, without a map in this water-logged maze . . . Within half a mile of leaving the Japanese I was tempted to stop and heave a dozen of the bodies – I had the clearest picture in my mind of those who were Hodson's rather than my own – back into the water. Only the nun and the elderly woman I would allow on board. But I knew that once I stopped I would lose all hope of catching up with Hodson.

Ahead of me, above the fields of uncropped sugar-cane, I could see the poles and straggling telegraph wire that marked one of the main roads to Shanghai. I pressed on towards it, the vehicle rolling from side to side on the earth track. Behind me the bodies were sliding about as if in some huge scrimmage, their heads banging the sides of the truck. It was now a short period after noon, and a potent but not altogether unpleasant stench had filled the cabin. In spite of its obvious source, it seemed in some way to be refracted and amplified by the odours of my own body, almost as if my hunger and exhaustion were acting as the catalyst for the process of putrefaction. A plague of flies had descended on the truck, and covered the outer surface of the rear window behind my head, so that I was unable to see if the Japanese were following me in their scout car. I could still see the profound sense of loss in their eyes as they had watched me leave, and I almost regretted that I had not taken them with me. Far from my being their prisoner, it was they who in some way belonged to the bodies lying behind me.

Before I could reach the main Shanghai road the radiator of the engine had boiled, and I wasted a full half an hour waiting for it to cool. In order to lighten the load on the engine, I decided to throw off Hodson's

corpses. There was now no chance whatever of catching up with him, and he was almost certainly speeding through the suburbs of Shanghai for a first look at his garage. Somehow I would find my own way to my parents' camp.

I climbed on to the back of the truck, and clambered among the bodies piled together. Gazing down at the yellowing faces between my feet, I realized that I recognized almost all of them – the nuns and the Chinese couple, the elderly woman and the three children, a slim young man of my own age with an amputated left hand, a pregnant woman in her early twenties who vaguely resembled my sister. These belonged to my flock, whereas Hodson's intruders were as distinct and separate as the members of a rival clan. Their leader was clearly a small, elderly man with a bare-chested body like a grey monkey's, whose sharp eyes had seemed to follow me all day as I lifted him on and off the trucks.

I bent down to seize him by the shoulders, but for some reason my hands were unable to touch him. Once again I felt that presentiment of death I had sensed so many times, surrounding me on all sides, in the canal beside the road, in the fields of sugar-cane and the distant telegraph wires, even in the drone of an American aircraft crossing far overhead. Only I and the passengers aboard this truck were immune.

I tried to pick up another of the corpses, but again my hands froze, and again I felt the same presentiment, an enclosing wall that enveloped us like the wire fence around our camp. I watched the flies swarm across my hands and over the faces of the bodies between my feet, relieved now that I would never again be forced to distinguish between us. I hurled the tarpaulin into the canal, so that the air could play over their faces as we sped along. When the engine of the truck had cooled I refilled the radiator with water from the canal, and set off towards the west.

It was without surprise, an hour later, that I came across Hodson's truck, and was able to make up the full complement of my passengers.

Where Hodson himself had gone I never discovered. Five miles down the Shanghai road, after two further delays to rest the engine, I found the truck abandoned by a Japanese road-block. In the afternoon haze the surface of the road seemed to be speckled with gold, nodes of bright light reflected from hundreds of spent cartridge cases. The Japanese here had fought a vigorous engagement, perhaps with some intruding patrol of Kuomintang troops. Webbing and empty ammunition boxes lay in the tank ditch dug across the road. Unable to drive around this obstacle, Hodson had presumably set off on foot.

I stopped beside his abandoned truck, listening to the harsh beat of my engine in the deserted air. A hundred yards behind me a narrow lane led across a field of sugar-cane in a westerly direction, and with luck would carry me a little further on my circuit of Shanghai.

First, however, I had to take on my additional passengers. At the time, as I carried the dozen corpses from Hodson's truck and lifted them on

to my own, it occurred to me more than once to give up the entire enterprise and set off on foot myself after Hodson. But as we turned off the road and rolled down the lane between the fields of sugar-cane I felt a curious kind of comfort that we were all together, almost a sense of security at the presence of my 'family'. At the same time the urge to rid myself of them still remained, and given the opportunity – a lift, perhaps, in a passing Kuomintang vehicle – I would have left them at the first chance. But within this empty landscape they did at least provide an element of security, particularly if a hostile Japanese patrol came across me. Also, for the first time I had begun to feel a sense of loyalty towards them, and the feeling that they, the dead, were more living than the living who had deserted me.

The afternoon sun had begun to set. I woke in the cabin of the truck to find that I had fallen asleep beside a broad canal whose brown surface had turned almost carmine in the fading light. In front of me were the approaches to an empty village, the single-storey dwellings concealed by the dark fronds of the wild sugar-cane. All afternoon I had been lost in a golden world, following the sun as it moved away from me across the drowned paddies and silent villages. I was certain that I had covered some twenty miles – the apartment houses of the French concession were no longer visible along the horizon.

My last attempt to free myself from the corpses took place that night. At dusk I stepped from the cabin of the truck and walked through the sugar-cane, breaking the stems and sucking the sweet pith. From the back of the truck the corpses watched me like a hostile chorus, their inclined heads slyly confiding in each other. I too at first resented this nourishment flowing through me, meagre though it was. As I revived, however, leaning against the radiator grille of the truck, I was suddenly tempted to release the handbrake and roll the vehicle forward into the blood-stained canal. As a result of committing myself to this lunatic troupe of passengers, ferrying them from the football stadium to some destination they had never agreed upon, I had lost the chance of seeing my parents that day.

Under the cover of darkness – for I would not have dared to commit this act by daylight – I returned to the truck and began to remove the bodies one by one, throwing them down on to the road. Clouds of flies festered around me, as if trying to warn me of the insanity of what I was doing. Exhausted, I pulled the bodies down like damp sacks, ruthlessly avoiding the faces of the nuns and the children, the young amputee and the elderly woman.

At this point, when I had nearly destroyed everything I had been allowed by circumstances to achieve, I was saved by the arrival of a party of bandits. Armed American merchant seamen, renegade Kuomintang and quisling auxiliaries of the Japanese, they arrived by sampans and rapidly occupied the village. Too tired to run from them, I crouched behind the truck, watching these heavily armed men move towards me. For some reason,

although I knew they would kill me, I had no sense whatever of that presentiment of death.

At the last moment, when they were only twenty feet away, I lay down in the darkness among the circle of corpses, taking my position between the young nun and the elderly woman. The ferocious flight of the thousand flies came to a stop, and I could hear the heavy step of the bandits and the sounds of their weapons. Lying there in the darkness in the circle of the dead, I watched them halt and peer into the truck, arms raised across their mouths. Unable to approach us, they waited for a few minutes and then returned to the village. All night, as they roamed from house to house, kicking down the doors and breaking the furniture, I lay in the circle of corpses. Towards dawn two of the Kuomintang soldiers came and began to search the pockets of the dead. Staring at the sky, I listened to them panting beside me, and felt their hands on my thighs and buttocks.

At dawn, when they left in their motorized sampans, the flies returned. I stood up and watched the sun rising through the dark forests of sugar-cane. Waiting for its disc to touch me, I summoned my companions to their feet.

From this time onwards, during the confused days of my journey to my parents' camp, I was completely identified with my companions. I no longer attempted to escape them. As we drove together through that landscape of war and its aftermath, past the endless canals and deserted villages, I was uncertain whether the events taking place spanned a few hours or many weeks. I was almost sure that by now the war should have been over, but the countryside remained empty, disturbed only by the sounds of the American aircraft overhead.

For much of the time I followed the westerly course of the river, a distant presence which provided my only compass bearing. I drove carefully along the broken roads that divided the paddy-fields, anxious not to disturb my passengers lying together behind me. It was they who had saved me from the bandits. I knew that in a sense I was their representative, the instrument of the new order which I had been delegated by them to bring to the world. I knew that I now had to teach the living that my companions were not merely the dead, but the last of the dead, and that soon the whole planet would share in the new life which they had earned for us.

One small example of this understanding was that I no longer wished for food. I looked out from the cabin of the truck at the wide fields of sugar-cane beside the river, knowing that their harvest would no longer be needed, and that the land could be turned over to the demands of my companions.

One afternoon, after a brief thunderstorm had driven the American aircraft from the sky, I reached the bank of the river. At some time a battle had been fought here among the wharfs and quays of a small Japanese naval air base. In the village behind the base there were shallow wells filled with rifles, and a pagoda housing a still intact anti-aircraft

gun. All the villagers had fled, but to my amazement I found that I was not alone.

Seated side by side in a rickshaw that had been abandoned in the central square of the village were an elderly Chinese and a child of ten or so whom I took to be his granddaughter. At first glance they looked as if they had hired the rickshaw a few hours beforehand and ridden out here to view this small battlefield that I too was now visiting. I stopped my truck, stepped down from the cabin and walked over to them, looking around to see if their coolie was present.

As I approached, the child climbed from the rickshaw and stood passively beside it. I could see now that, far from being a spectator, her grandfather had been seriously wounded in the battle. A large piece of shrapnel had driven through the side of the rickshaw into his hip.

In Chinese I said to him, 'I'm making my way to the Soochow road. If you wish, you and your granddaughter are welcome to ride with my companions.'

He made no reply, but I knew from his eyes that despite his injuries he had immediately recognized me, and understood that I was the harbinger of all that lay before him. For the first time I realized why I had seen so few Chinese during the past days. They had not gone away for ever, but were waiting for my return. I alone could repopulate their land.

Together the child and I walked down to the concrete ramp of the naval air base. In the deep water below the wharf lay the drowned forms of hundreds of cars rounded up from the allied nationals in Shanghai and dumped here by the Japanese. They rested on the river bed twenty feet below the surface, the elements of a past world that would never be able to reconstitute itself now that I and my companions, this child and her grandfather had taken possession of the land.

Two days later we at last reached the approaches to my parents' camp. During our journey the child sat beside me in the cabin of the truck, while her grandfather rode comfortably with my companions. Although she complained of hunger to begin with, I patiently taught her that food was no longer necessary to us. Fortunately I was able to distract her by pointing out the different marks of American aircraft that crossed the sky.

After we reached the Soochow road the landscape was to change. Close to the Yangtse we had entered an area of old battlegrounds. On all sides the Chinese had emerged from their hiding places and were waiting for my arrival. They lay in the fields around their houses, legs stirring in the water that seeped across the paddy-fields. They watched from the embankments of the tank-ditches, from their burial mounds and from the doors of their ruined houses.

Beside me the child slept fitfully on the seat. Free of any fear of embarrassing her, I stopped the truck and took off my ragged clothes, leaving only a crude bandage on my arm that covered a small wound.

Naked, I knelt in front of the vehicle, raising my arms to my congregation in the fields around me, like a king assuming his crown at his coronation. Although still a virgin, I exposed my loins to the Chinese watching me as they lay quietly in the fields. With those loins I would seed the dead.

Every fifty yards, as I approached the distant water-tower of my parents' camp, I stopped the truck and knelt naked in front of its boiling radiator. There was no sign of movement from the camp compound, and I was sure now what I would find there.

The child lay motionlessly in my arms. As I knelt with her in the centre of the road, wondering if it were time for her to join my companions, I noticed that her lips still moved. Without thinking, giving way to what then seemed a meaningless impulse, I tore a small shred of flesh from the wound on my arm and pressed it between her lips.

Feeding her in this way, I walked with her towards the camp a few hundred yards away. The child stirred in my arms. Looking down I saw that her eyes had partly opened. Although unable to see me, she seemed aware of the movement of my stride.

From the gates of the camp, on the roofs of the dormitory blocks, on the causeways of the paddy-fields beyond the wire, people were moving. Their figures were coming towards me, advancing waist-deep through the stunted sugar-cane. Astonished, I pressed the child to my chest, aware of her mouthing my flesh. Standing naked a hundred yards from the truck, I counted a dozen, a score, then fifty of the internees, some with children behind them.

At last, through this child and my body, the dead were coming to life, rising from their fields and doorways and coming to greet me. I saw my mother and father at the gates of the camp, and knew that I had given my death to them and so brought them into this world. Unharmed they had passed into the commonwealth of the living, and of the other living beyond the dead.

I knew now that the war was over.

1977

THE INDEX

Editor's note. From abundant internal evidence it seems clear that the text printed below is the index to the unpublished and perhaps suppressed autobiography of a man who may well have been one of the most remarkable figures of the 20th century. Yet of his existence nothing is publicly known, although his life and work appear to have exerted a profound influence on the events of the past fifty years. Physician and philosopher, man of action and patron of the arts, sometime claimant to the English throne and founder of a new religion, Henry Rhodes Hamilton was evidently the intimate of the greatest men and women of our age. After World War II he founded a new movement of spiritual regeneration, but private scandal and public concern at his growing megalomania, culminating in his proclamation of himself as a new divinity, seem to have led to his downfall. Incarcerated within an unspecified government institution, he presumably spent his last years writing his autobiography, of which this index is the only surviving fragment.

A substantial mystery still remains. Is it conceivable that all traces of his activities could be erased from our records of the period? Is the suppressed autobiography itself a disguised *roman à clef*, in which the fictional hero exposes the secret identities of his historical contemporaries? And what is the true role of the indexer himself, clearly a close friend of the writer, who first suggested that he embark on his autobiography? This ambiguous and shadowy figure has taken the unusual step of indexing himself into his own index. Perhaps the entire compilation is nothing more than a figment of the over-wrought imagination of some deranged lexicographer. Alternatively, the index may be wholly genuine, and the only glimpse we have into a world hidden from us by a gigantic conspiracy, of which Henry Rhodes Hamilton is the greatest victim.

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THE INTENSIVE CARE UNIT

Within a few minutes the next attack will begin. Now that I am surrounded for the first time by all the members of my family it seems only fitting that a complete record should be made of this unique event. As I lie here – barely able to breathe, my mouth filled with blood and every tremor of my hands reflected in the attentive eye of the camera six feet away – I realize that there are many who will think my choice of subject a curious one. In all senses, this film will be the ultimate home-movie, and I only hope that whoever watches it will gain some idea of the immense affection I feel for my wife, and for my son and daughter, and of the affection that they, in their unique way, feel for me.

It is now half an hour since the explosion, and everything in this once elegant sitting room is silent. I am lying on the floor by the settee, looking at the camera mounted safely out of reach on the ceiling above my head. In this uneasy stillness, broken only by my wife's faint breathing and the irregular movement of my son across the carpet, I can see that almost everything I have assembled so lovingly during the past years has been destroyed. My Sèvres lies in a thousand fragments in the fireplace, the Hokusai scrolls are punctured in a dozen places. Yet despite the extensive damage this is still recognizably the scene of a family reunion, though of a rather special kind.

My son David crouches at his mother's feet, chin resting on the torn Persian carpet, his slow movement marked by a series of smeared hand-prints. Now and then, when he raises his head, I can see that he is still alive. His eyes are watching me, calculating the distance between us and the time it will take him to reach me. His sister Karen is little more than an arm's length away, lying beside the fallen standard lamp between the settee and the fireplace, but he ignores her. Despite my fear, I feel a powerful sense of pride that he should have left his mother and set out on this immense journey towards me. For his own sake I would rather he lay still and conserved what little strength and time are left to him, but he presses on with all the determination his seven-year-old body can muster.

My wife Margaret, who is sitting in the armchair facing me, raises her hand in some kind of confused warning, and then lets it fall limply on to the stained damask arm-rest. Distorted by her smudged lipstick, the brief smile she gives me might seem to the casual spectator of this film to be ironic or even threatening, but I am merely struck once again by her remarkable beauty. Watching her, and relieved that she will probably never rise from

her armchair again, I think of our first meeting ten years ago, then as now within the benevolent gaze of the television camera.

The unusual, not to say illicit, notion of actually meeting my wife and children in the flesh had occurred to me some three months earlier, during one of our extended family breakfasts. Since the earliest days of our marriage Sunday mornings had always been especially enjoyable. There were the pleasures of breakfast in bed, of talking over the papers and whatever else had taken place during the week. Switching to our private channel, Margaret and I would make love, celebrating the deep peace of our marriage beds. Later, we would call in the children and watch them playing in their nurseries, and perhaps surprise them with the promise of a visit to the park or circus.

All these activities, of course, like our family life itself, were made possible by television. At that time neither I nor anyone else had ever dreamed that we might actually meet in person. In fact, age-old though rarely invoked ordinances still existed to prevent this – to meet another human being was an indictable offence (especially, for reasons I then failed to understand, a member of one's own family, presumably part of some ancient system of incest taboos). My own upbringing, my education and medical practice, my courtship of Margaret and our happy marriage, all occurred within the generous rectangle of the television screen. Margaret's insemination was of course by AID, and like all children David's and Karen's only contact with their mother was during their brief uterine life.

In every sense, needless to say, this brought about an immense increase in the richness of human experience. As a child I had been brought up in the hospital crèche, and thus spared all the psychological dangers of a physically intimate family life (not to mention the hazards, aesthetic and otherwise, of a shared domestic hygiene). But far from being isolated I was surrounded by companions. On television I was never alone. In my nursery I played hours of happy games with my parents, who watched me from the comfort of their homes, feeding on to my screen a host of video-games, animated cartoons, wild-life films and family serials which together opened the world to me.

My five years as a medical student passed without my ever needing to see a patient in the flesh. My skills in anatomy and physiology were learned at the computer display terminal. Advanced techniques of diagnosis and surgery eliminated any need for direct contact with an organic illness. The probing camera, with its infra-red and X-ray scanners, its computerized diagnostic aids, revealed far more than any unaided human eye.

Perhaps I was especially adept at handling these complex keyboards and retrieval systems – a finger-tip sensitivity that was the modern equivalent of the classical surgeon's operative skills – but by the age of thirty I had already established a thriving general practice. Freed from the need to visit my surgery in person, my patients would merely dial themselves on to my television screen. The selection of these incoming calls – how

tactfully to fade out a menopausal housewife and cut to a dysenteric child, while remembering to cue in separately the anxious parents – required a considerable degree of skill, particularly as the patients themselves shared these talents. The more neurotic patients usually far exceeded them, presenting themselves with the disjointed cutting, aggressive zooms and split-screen techniques that went far beyond the worst excesses of experimental cinema.

My first meeting with Margaret took place when she called me during a busy morning surgery. As I glanced into what was still known nostalgically as 'the waiting room' – the visual display projecting brief filmic profiles of the day's patients – I would customarily have postponed to the next day any patient calling without an appointment. But I was immediately struck, first by her age – she seemed to be in her late twenties – and then by the remarkable pallor of this young woman. Below close-cropped blonde hair her underlit eyes and slim mouth were set in a face that was almost ashen. I realized that, unlike myself and everyone else, she was wearing no make-up for the cameras. This accounted both for her arctic skin-tones and for her youthless appearance – on television, thanks to make-up, everyone of whatever age was 22, the cruel divisions of chronology banished for good.

It must have been this absence of make-up that first seeded the idea, to flower with such devastating consequences ten years later, of actually meeting Margaret in person. Intrigued by her unclassifiable appearance, I shelved my other patients and began our interview. She told me that she was a masseuse, and after a polite preamble came to the point. For some months she had been concerned that a small lump in her left breast might be cancerous.

I made some reassuring reply, and told her that I would examine her. At this point, without warning, she leaned forward, unbuttoned her shirt and exposed her breast.

Startled, I stared at this huge organ, some two feet in diameter, which filled my television screen. An almost Victorian code of visual ethics governed the doctor/patient relationship, as it did all social intercourse. No physician ever saw his patients undressed, and the location of any intimate ailments was always indicated by the patient by means of diagram slides. Even among married couples the partial exposure of their bodies was a comparative rarity, and the sexual organs usually remained veiled behind the most misty filters, or were coyly alluded to by the exchange of cartoon drawings. Of course, a clandestine pornographic channel operated, and prostitutes of both sexes plied their wares, but even the most expensive of these would never appear live, instead substituting a pre-recorded film-strip of themselves at the moment of climax.

These admirable conventions eliminated all the dangers of personal involvement, and this liberating affectlessness allowed those who so wished to explore the fullest range of sexual possibility and paved the way for the day when a truly guilt-free sexual perversity and, even, psychopathology might be enjoyed by all.

Staring at the vast breast and nipple, with their uncompromising geometries, I decided that my best way of dealing with this eccentrically frank young woman was to ignore any lapse from convention. After the infra-red examination confirmed that the suspected cancer nodule was in fact a benign cyst she buttoned her shirt and said:

'That's a relief. Do call me, doctor, if you ever need a course of massage. I'll be delighted to repay you.'

Though still intrigued by her, I was about to roll the credits at the conclusion of this bizarre consultation when her casual offer lodged in my mind. Curious to see her again, I arranged an appointment for the following week.

Without realizing it, I had already begun my courtship of this unusual young woman. On the evening of my appointment, I half-suspected that she was some kind of novice prostitute. However, as I lay discreetly robed on the recreation couch in my sauna, manipulating my body in response to Margaret's instructions, there was not the slightest hint of salaciousness. During the evenings that followed I never once detected a glimmer of sexual awareness, though at times, as we moved through our exercises together, we revealed far more of our bodies to each other than many married couples. Margaret, I realized, was a sport, one of those rare people with no sense of self-consciousness, and little awareness of the prurient emotions she might arouse in others.

Our courtship entered a more formal phase. We began to go out together – that is, we shared the same films on television, visited the same theatres and concert halls, watched the same meals prepared in restaurants, all within the comfort of our respective homes. In fact, at this time I had no idea where Margaret lived, whether she was five miles away from me or five hundred. Shyly at first, we exchanged old footage of ourselves, of our childhoods and schooldays, our favourite foreign resorts.

Six months later we were married, at a lavish ceremony in the most exclusive of the studio chapels. Over two hundred guests attended, joining a huge hook-up of television screens, and the service was conducted by a priest renowned for his mastery of the split-screen technique. Pre-recorded films of Margaret and myself taken separately in our own sitting rooms were projected against a cathedral interior and showed us walking together down an immense aisle.

For our honeymoon we went to Venice. Happily we shared the panoramic views of the crowds in St Mark's Square, and gazed at the Tintorettos in the Academy School. Our wedding night was a triumph of the director's art. As we lay in our respective beds (Margaret was in fact some thirty miles to the south of me, somewhere in a complex of vast high-rises), I courted Margaret with a series of increasingly bold zooms, which she countered in a sweetly teasing way with her shy fades and wipes. As we undressed and exposed ourselves to each other the screens merged into a last oblivious close-up . . .

* * *

From the start we made a handsome couple, sharing all our interests, spending more time on the screen together than any couple we knew. In due course, through AID, Karen was conceived and born, and soon after her second birthday in the residential crèche she was joined by David.

Seven further years followed of domestic bliss. During this period I had made an impressive reputation for myself as a paediatrician of advanced views by my championship of family life – this fundamental unit, as I described it, of intensive care. I repeatedly urged the installation of more cameras throughout the homes of family members, and provoked vigorous controversy when I suggested that families should bathe together, move naked but without embarrassment around their respective bedrooms, and even that fathers should attend (though not in close-up) the births of their children.

It was during a pleasant family breakfast together that there occurred to me the extraordinary idea that was so dramatically to change our lives. I was looking at the image of Margaret on the screen, enjoying the beauty of the cosmetic mask she now wore – ever thicker and more elaborate as the years passed, it made her grow younger all the time. I relished the elegantly stylized way in which we now presented ourselves to each other – fortunately we had moved from the earnestness of Bergman and the more facile mannerisms of Fellini and Hitchcock to the classical serenity and wit of René Clair and Max Ophuls, though the children, with their love of the hand-held camera, still resembled so many budding Godards.

Recalling the abrupt way in which Margaret had first revealed herself to me, I realized that the logical extension of Margaret's frankness – on which, effectively, I had built my career – was that we should all meet together in person. Throughout my entire life, I reflected, I had never once seen, let alone touched, another human being. Whom better to begin with than my own wife and children?

Tentatively I raised the suggestion with Margaret, and I was delighted when she agreed.

'What an odd but marvellous idea! Why on earth has no one suggested it before?'

We decided instantly that the archaic interdiction against meeting another human being deserved simply to be ignored.

Unhappily, for reasons I failed to understand at the time, our first meeting was not a success. To avoid confusing the children, we deliberately restricted the first encounter to ourselves. I remember the days of anticipation as we made preparations for Margaret's journey – an elaborate undertaking, for people rarely travelled, except at the speed of the television signal.

An hour before she arrived I disconnected the complex security precautions that sealed my house from the world outside, the electronic alarm signals, steel grilles and gas-tight doors.

At last the bell rang. Standing by the internal portcullis at the end of the

entrance hall, I released the magnetic catches on the front door. A few seconds later the figure of a small, narrow-shouldered woman stepped into the hall. Although she was over twenty feet from me I could see her clearly, but I almost failed to realize that this was the wife to whom I had been married for ten years.

Neither of us was wearing make-up. Without its cosmetic mask Margaret's face seemed pasty and unhealthy, and the movements of her white hands were nervous and unsettled. I was struck by her advanced age and, above all, by her small size. For years I had known Margaret as a huge close-up on one or other of the large television screens in the house. Even in long-shot she was usually larger than this hunched and diminutive woman hovering at the end of the hall. It was difficult to believe that I had ever been excited by her empty breasts and narrow thighs.

Embarrassed by each other, we stood without speaking at opposite ends of the hall. I knew from her expression that Margaret was as surprised by my appearance as I was by her own. In addition, there was a curiously searching look in her eye, an element almost of hostility that I had never seen before.

Without thinking, I moved my hand to the latch of the portcullis. Already Margaret had stepped back into the doorway, as if nervous that I might seal her into the hall for ever. Before I could speak, she had turned and fled.

When she had gone I carefully checked the locks on the front door. Around the entrance hung a faint and not altogether pleasant odour.

After this first abortive meeting Margaret and I returned to the happy peace of our married life. So relieved was I to see her on the screen that I could hardly believe our meeting had ever taken place. Neither of us referred to the disaster, and to the unpleasant emotions which our brief encounter had prompted.

During the next few days I reflected painfully on the experience. Far from bringing us together, the meeting had separated us. True closeness, I now knew, was television closeness – the intimacy of the zoom lens, the throat microphone, the close-up itself. On the television screen there were no body odours or strained breathing, no pupil contractions and facial reflexes, no mutual sizing up of emotions and advantage, no distrust and insecurity. Affection and compassion demanded distance. Only at a distance could one find that true closeness to another human being which, with grace, might transform itself into love.

Nevertheless, we inevitably arranged a second meeting. Why we did so I have still not understood, but both of us seemed to be impelled by those very motives of curiosity and distrust that I assumed we most feared. Calmly discussing everything with Margaret, I learned that she had felt the same distaste for me that I in turn had felt for her, the same obscure hostility.

We decided that we would bring the children to our next meeting, and that we would all wear make-up, modelling our behaviour as closely as possible on our screen life together. Accordingly, three months later, Margaret and myself, David and Karen, that unit of intensive care, came together for the first time in my sitting room.

Karen is stirring. She had rolled across the shaft of the broken standard lamp and her body faces me across the blood-stained carpet, as naked as when she stripped in front of me. This provocative act, presumably intended to jolt some incestuous fantasy buried in her father's mind, first set off the explosion of violence which has left us bloody and exhausted in the ruins of my sitting room. For all the wounds on her body, the bruises that disfigure her small breasts, she reminds me of Manet's *Olympia*, perhaps painted a few hours after the visit of some psychotic client.

Margaret, too, is watching her daughter. She sits forward, eyeing Karen with a gaze that is both possessive and menacing. Apart from a brief lunge at my testicles, she has ignored me. For some reason the two women have selected each other as their chief targets, just as David has vented almost all his hostility on me. I had not expected the scissors to be in his hand when I first slapped him. He is only a few feet from me now, ready to mount his last assault. For some reason he seemed particularly outraged by the display of teddy bears I had mounted so carefully for him, and shreds of these dismembered animals lie everywhere on the floor.

Fortunately I can breathe a little more freely now. I move my head to take in the ceiling camera and my fellow combatants. Together we present a grotesque aspect. The heavy television make-up we all decided to wear has dissolved into a set of bizarre halloween masks.

All the same, we are at last together, and my affection for them overrides these small problems of mutual adjustment. As soon as they arrived, the bruise on my son's head and my wife's bleeding ears betrayed the evidence of some potentially lethal scuffle. I knew that it would be a testing time. But at least we are making a start, in our small way establishing the possibility of a new kind of family life.

Everyone is breathing more strongly, and the attack will clearly begin within a minute. I can see the bloody scissors in my son's hand, and remember the pain as he stabbed me. I brace myself against the settee, ready to kick his face. With my right arm I am probably strong enough to take on whoever survives the last confrontation between my wife and daughter. Smiling at them affectionately, rage thickening the blood in my throat, I am only aware of my feelings of unbounded love.

1977

THEATRE OF WAR

Author's preface

After three hundred years, could civil war again divide the United Kingdom? Given rising unemployment and industrial stagnation, an ever more entrenched class system and a weak monarchy detaching itself from all but its ceremonial roles, is it possible to visualize the huge antagonisms between the extreme left and right resolving themselves in open civil conflict? I take it for granted that despite its unhappy experience in South East Asia the intervention of the United States to defend its military and economic investments would be even more certain than it was in Vietnam. I also assume that the television coverage would be uninterrupted and all-pervasive, and have therefore cast it in the form of a TV documentary, of the type made popular by World in Action.

Part One
LONDON UNDER SIEGE

STREET BATTLE

Inner London, a back street in Lambeth, where confused street-fighting is taking place. Tank engine noise forms a continuous background to heavy machine-gun fire and intercom chatter. Twenty soldiers, five American and the rest British, move from door to door, firing at the other end of the street, where Big Ben is visible above the shabby roof-tops. Helicopter gunships circle overhead. A tank stops by a house and soldiers dart in. A moment later a woman emerges, followed by three exhausted children and an old man carrying his bedroll. They run past with stunned faces. Bodies lie everywhere. Two negro GIs drag away a dead enemy soldier with shoulder-length hair. Stitched to his camouflage jacket is a Union Jack. The picture freezes, and the camera zooms in on the Union Jack until it fills the screen, soaked in the soldier's blood.

WORLD IN ACTION TITLES

Superimposed over the bloody Union Jack: 'Civil War'

Commentator

One street battle is over, but the civil war goes on. After four years no

solution is in sight. American casualties total 30,000 dead, a hundred thousand missing and wounded. A million British civilians have died. Despite mounting criticism at home America pours more and more troops into what is now the European Vietnam. But the fighting continues. This week the Liberation Front launched a major offensive against a dozen cities. Here in Lambeth a suicide squad fights its way to within 800 yards of the House of Parliament. How long can the British government survive? Will peace ever come? *World in Action* is here to find out.

STREET BATTLE

The fighting is over, and the government forces are mopping up. They flush frightened civilians from the basements and herd them away past the bodies of enemy soldiers. At the junction with the main road in the background a British Airways advertisement hoarding is riddled with bullet holes. A sullen-faced young English woman is frisked roughly by British troops while others tear the Union Jacks from dead enemy soldiers. The tank drags away a tangle of bodies lashed together by their wrists. In a jeep loaded with looted cameras, radios and record players pop music blares from the intercom.

CUT TO NIGHT-TIME SOHO

Background of garish lights, pintable arcades, strip clubs. GIs spill out of cars and move into a bar.

Commentator

GIs relax during a weekend of R & R. Two days ago they were fighting off a Liberation Front offensive in the suburbs of Manchester. As the United Nations talks of settlement and both sides in the civil war plan new offensives, what do the ordinary GIs think of the prospects for peace?

1st US soldier (reclining in bar)

It's a very ticklish situation over here. It's hard to analyse and get a complete grasp of the whole story, because from my position at least you can't get a glimpse of the whole subject. You know, you don't know what motivates these people. Peace seems to be very far off, at least to me it does.

Commentator

Tell me, do you think it's all worth it?

2nd US soldier

It's hard to say. I think we're just, as I see it, we're fooling around. That's about all. I do think we should be here.

Commentator

What's the alternative to fooling around?

3rd US soldier

Well, they call it a civil war. If it's a war, it should be that. They push us, we push them, it's a kind of stalemate as I see it right now. I think we should show them who's boss. Because what I've seen of the gooks over here, they're going to fight, *fight* – you know? – and just keep on fighting.

2nd US soldier

If you're fighting a war, fight it like a war, with all the mass of power we have. Power in reserve, air power, land power, and power from the sea. We've got battleships offshore can pound this place to absolutely nothing.

Commentator

Tough talk from the GIs as they relax, but in the bright light of day, as London picks up the pieces after the latest NLF offensive, what exactly is the present military position? Can either side win this war? In New York today President Reagan was asked what kind of settlement he would hope to resolve. The President replied: 'I don't think we can talk about settlement of the war at this point. I think we *can* talk about our willingness to accept a coalition or fusion government. At least it could very well be talked about in the open before we begin to talk about negotiations.' President Reagan spent the day in New York City where he addressed a luncheon audience and denied that the war is indefensible, a view strongly challenged by Congressional leaders of both parties. But how accurate is the picture which the American public at large has of the civil war?

NEWSREEL

Medley of clips – Civilians running as GIs and British government troops move across a tenement courtyard, firing at a roof-top sniper; helicopters circling a fortified Wembley Stadium; street execution near Piccadilly Circus of three NLF soldiers in plain clothes, hands wired, as a crowd outside a sandbagged cinema looks on; corpses of children laid out in a village hall; gun-battle outside a Top-Rank Bingo hall; crowd at Bellevue, Manchester, fun-fair backing off a roundabout to reveal a body pumped up and down by a wooden unicorn to the Wurlitzer music; lines of strip clubs in Oxford, entrances guarded by Military Police barring civilians; pound-notes over-printed 'One Dollar'; tanks ringing Parliament Square; shops loaded with consumer goods; a huge bonfire of Union Jacks; elderly refugees camping on the canted decks of a multi-storey car park in Dover, guarded by uncertain-looking GIs straight off a troop-carrier; government troops demolishing a rebel earth bunker lined with carefully framed portraits of George VI during World War II, visiting munitions factories and bombed-out East Enders.

Commentator

As each day passes, life in the government-held areas becomes less and less tolerable. London is a city under siege. Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham are the last remaining strongholds of government support, defended by massive American forces. The countryside belongs to the NLF. The continuous infiltration of the London suburbs by guerilla battalions mingling with the local population has brought the front line to everyone's doorstep. Bomb outrages, kidnappings, street battles with snipers, the assassination of local political leaders – these are part of day-to-day life. In the five years of its exile in Riyadh, uneasy guests of

the Saudi royal house, the monarchy has lost all credibility, unwilling to commit its waning prestige to either side in the civil war. Meanwhile, in the London over which the Queen once reigned, the black market flourishes. Millions of dollars' worth of American goods pour into the capital, propping up a juke-box economy of pirate TV networks, thousands of bars and brothels. In many towns and suburbs the main unit of currency is the illegal NLF pound sterling. The government-backed British dollar is despised. Anything can be bought, but nothing has any value. More and more young people slip away to join the Liberation Front. Doctors, engineers, trained mechanics desert to the enemy forces. They leave behind a population that consists mainly of the old middle class and an army of bartenders, croupiers and call-girls. London is now a gigantic Las Vegas, the largest light-bulb in the world, ready to blow out in a hail of rebel machine-gun fire.

COMMENTATOR IN GROSVENOR SQUARE

American Embassy in background, surrounded by tanks. GIs and British troops patrol. Muted gunfire near distance, but civilians go about their ordinary lives without concern.

Commentator

As both sides mount major offensives, I'm standing in Grosvenor Square, the old Eisenhowerplatz of World War II, once again the headquarters of the American and British government forces. This time they are fighting, not the superbly equipped German Wehrmacht with its panzer divisions, but a British peasant army. None the less, can the government forces and their American allies win? Will the war ever end?

INTERVIEW WITH BRITISH SUPREME COMMANDER

A sometime heir to the English throne, the 36-year-old commander of the government forces is an aggressive, media-wise opportunist with pearl-handled revolver, black flying suit and white silk scarf. He is shown parading in a succession of military uniforms, firing a sub-machine-gun at a rifle range, inspecting a dispirited platoon of government troops, boarding his roof-top helicopter which he flies himself to inspect the attacks breaking out all over the city (though the viewer is unsure whether he is about to make a discreet bunk), and generally trying to boost the morale of his entourage. His line is confident but embittered; he knows he has lost his throne by his involvement with the puppet regime. He hates the NLF, but the Americans more. His hero is Rommel, but his style is James Bond.

British Commander

As Commander of the British loyalist forces, my job is to win the war and unify the country again. The enemy is increasingly fighting out of desperation. Our intelligence tells us that he is running out of men, out of steam and out of material. He simply doesn't have the economic potential to maintain a war. The people in Europe and the United States

who criticize the war don't really know what's going on. Quite evidently the people of this country don't want anything to do with the people up north, or with the communist way of life.

Commentator

You don't feel, General, that you and the Americans are forcing a form of government on the people of this country?

British Commander

No, we're not forcing anything on them. The United States feels that this is a good place to stop communist aggression, and if the government forces do win, and I know they will, we'll have, firstly, a good ally, and we'll have stopped communist aggression from taking over the United Kingdom and eventually France and everywhere else.

(Points to map showing blacked-out areas of British Isles.)

Our forces are now moving forward into a series of major confrontations with the other side, so I think you can look forward to when that map will be white again. Then I know the Americans will be glad to leave for home.

COMMENTATOR BACK IN GROSVENOR SQUARE

Maps in hand, he addresses camera.

Commentator

Meanwhile, however, the British Commander is reported to be asking the US President for yet more troops. How many soldiers will be needed to hold the line against the NLF? Despite the General's easy optimism it isn't his map which most people look at, but this one issued by the NLF.

(Lifts other map. Black areas encircle major cities, all the countryside.)

It's this one they consult if they want to visit their relatives in the country or move to another town. It's this one they use if they want to defect to the NLF.

EXPLOSION BURSTS ACROSS SQUARE

Camera wobbles, swings wildly. Panic, people running. Commentator ducks, then starts talking in confused way.

Commentator

. . . there's been a – it looks, it looks as if a sniper. What seems to be happening is that a –

CROWD FORMING A ROUGH CIRCLE AROUND A JEEP

GIs push people back, and look down at the body of an American officer in the front seat, blood pouring from wound. Pop music blares from the intercom radio a few inches from his face.

Radio Announcer

We have a list of the latest curfew regulations. In the inner capital the curfew bell is midnight to 6 a.m. for Kensington, Knightsbridge and Battersea and from 10 to 7 a.m. for the 3rd Air Cav. and support units in –

GI REACHES OVER AND SWITCHES OFF RADIO

Commentator

Five minutes ago a senior American officer was assassinated as he sat in his jeep outside the American officers' club here in Grosvenor Square. An NLF killer in civilian clothes stepped through the lunch-time crowd and fired a single shot, then disappeared back into the crowd. The officer, Colonel Wilson J. Tucker, a military adviser in the 'hearts and minds' mission, widely suspected of being a cover for a CIA murder squad, died within a few seconds. All that's known about the killer is that he was 'young', probably in his early twenties, a safe enough assumption at a time when most of the young men and women here have long since left to join the Liberation Front, at a time when to be young automatically invites the attentions of the military police and the hostility of the old and middle-aged who provide the last support for the puppet regime. As one visiting Canadian journalist put it to me . . .

CANADIAN JOURNALIST IN HOTEL BAR

Canadian Journalist

All the NLF have to do to win this war is wait ten years. By then everyone on the government side will be either dead or in a wheelchair.

SHOTS OF YOUNG PEOPLE AT CAMP SITE

Police hustling them about. Older people watching as girls and young men have their hair shaved.

Commentator

Certainly one of the most striking divisions in British life is the now unbridgeable gulf between the young and the old. Even if the peace talks start and a settlement is finally reached, will it be possible for them to live together in one society? A legacy of resentment, intolerance and sexual jealousy has been fed by years of violence and open war. At a time when the twin pillars of life in the government areas are the strip club and the US dollar, does Britain any longer possess the political and social institutions to make possible a real society?

Canadian journalist

I don't see Parliament now as a functioning entity in any way. It's a rump of older Members of Parliament and extreme right-wingers, a blow-hole for all kinds of unpleasant fascist gas. As a legislature it's non-existent. Let's face the facts, the British government is a puppet regime, *and it means to keep it that way*. The economy has a real balance of payments surplus for the first time in thirty years, thanks to American war-spending and the GI dollar. Baby, nobody on this side says 'Yank, go home'. They're more likely to offer you their sister – or their mother. Their sister's on the other side.

Commentator

Patriotism takes many forms. Is it significant, though, that the flag of the

Liberation Front is the Union Jack, long-standing symbol of the union of Britain's major provincial areas – a symbol now hated and feared by the government supporters? To what extent can the government itself provide any prospects for unity?

INTERVIEW WITH BRITISH PRIME MINISTER

A former Labour Prime Minister recalled to office, to lead the all-party coalition, he sits uneasily inside a sandbagged Downing Street, literally ducking every time a shot is heard. He is surrounded by armed guards, but looks shifty and dispirited. All too clearly he is at the Americans' mercy, and has no ideas for bringing the war to an end.

Commentator

Could I ask you first, Prime Minister, are you hopeful at the moment at the outlook for peace?

Prime Minister

Well, it depends very much on what the other side wants to do. The latest offensives – attacks against the ordinary people of this country – don't suggest that they're particularly sincere in their talk about wanting a settlement.

Commentator

Do you envisage that the departure of the American troops will create problems? If one travels around London one sees that a large part of the local economy is geared to serving the GI. When the GI is gone, won't there be problems for those people who presently are . . .

Prime Minister

Well, this contains the same problem shared by all those countries that have had large American forces on their soil – Germany, Japan, Vietnam. I think it will be a good thing because we shall be back to normal and a lot of people will have to look for a living within their means. They'll have to give up a lot of windfall benefits which come from the war and create social problems. We've now got in this country a class of people created by the war, and I think it's a good thing that this will stop.

Commentator

Childhood for most of the children in London has been a strange life with the American dollar, hasn't it? The American dollar has been the way they passed their childhood. When that in the form of the GI goes, are they not going to have a lot of problems?

Prime Minister

I'm sure they will. They'll be economic problems mainly. I think we're all going to have to find ourselves, so to speak, a painful process whether it's an individual or a nation. I think there's going to be a period of readjustment, possibly of turbulence, but they must go through the process. Perhaps if they'd gone through it twenty years ago there wouldn't be a war now.

GENERAL VIEWS OF PEOPLE HANGING AROUND ENTRANCES TO AMERICAN BASES

Commentator

Can the British people find themselves? Can they go through the painful process of re-establishing themselves as a single nation? With 70 per cent of the economy tied to the war, with the revenues from North Sea oil long since sold off to the Germans and Japanese, will ordinary people be able to make the adjustments necessary to living with the other side? In short, do they want the war to end at all? *World in Action* visited a village in the front line to see how the bulk of the population is facing up to the reality of the war.

GENERAL PICTURE OF SMALL TOWN IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

Barbed wire, road blocks, troops and armoured cars. Gunfire in the distance.

Commentator

Here at Cookham, only twenty miles or so from the centre of London, the 'windfall benefits' of the war are more likely to be a sniper's bullet or a barrage of enemy mortar shells. This is one of the so-called pacified villages. By day the British and American forces occupy the bunkers and pillboxes. In the evening they withdraw with the local administrators to a fortified enclave near the American base at Windsor. At night the Liberation Front moves in. At this moment their advance positions are no more than two hundred yards away, their sentries watching us through binoculars. None of these villagers will talk to us. All are assumed to be Liberation Front sympathizers, but in fact they are professional neutrals, living on the edge of a giant razor that could cut them down at any moment. They farm the fields, work in the garages and shops, and wait for the Americans to leave. Strangest of all here, there is no one between the ages of four and forty.

TANK APPEARS, FOLLOWED BY BRITISH AND AMERICAN SOLDIERS

Commentator

A special task force arrives, part of a self-styled Pacification Probe that will advance ten miles into country recently occupied by the Liberation Front. One tank, ten GIs of the First Cavalry Division, and thirty British soldiers are under the command of Captain Arjay Robinson. *World in Action* is going with them to see what happens.

CAPTAIN ROBINSON BRIEFING HIS UNIT IN THE VILLAGE HALL

The GIs, heavily armed with flak jackets and radio-equipped helmets, sit at the front, the British troops with two elderly officers at the back.

Captain Robinson

The primary mission of Alpha Company is to conduct a reconnaissance and pacification. Circles indicate supply caches within the area, also known parking areas, primarily wheeled vehicles and larger trucks. There are also some small yellow dots, these indicate known positions where we have seen tanks. There are tanks in the area definitely. As I see it right now we're going to have two companies controlling the fire base. We'll play it real loose, play it by ear pretty much as to where we're going and the times that we'll go. We're going down there and kill the enemy where we find him and come back.

Part Two
PACIFICATION PROBE

Commentator

A Pacification Probe prepares to set off. It's 6.35 a.m., and the thirty British soldiers who will do the major part of the fighting – and the major part of the dying – wait quietly in the background as the American tank crew and radio specialists prepare their equipment. The American weapons and communications are now so sophisticated that the British troops can barely understand them. Many of these men will defect on this mission, many more will die. What are they up against? Last month a Swedish film crew smuggled itself through the front lines. Their brief film shows what life is like within the Liberation Front.

NEWSREEL OF LIBERATION FRONT AREAS

Mountains, tunnel entrances guarded by young soldiers and armed young women. Union Jacks flying. People working in factories. Alternative technology, windmills, small-scale smelting works, machine shops, hand-looms. Children everywhere, thin but healthy. Kibbutz atmosphere, young mothers in khaki mini-skirts with babies and rifles. Slit trenches, men with rifles move through fields around burnt-out American tank. Callisthenics in drill-hall, communal singing around flag. Indoctrination sessions, 18-year-old political commissar addressing doctors and nursing staff in hospital. Children taking part in people's theatre, 4-year-olds dressed in parody US military uniforms miming bombing attacks on sturdy villagers. Everywhere slogans, loudspeakers, portraits of George VI.

Swedish voice-over

The mountains of Scotland and Wales are the main strongholds of the National Liberation Front. In the four-year war against the British central government hundreds of underground schools and factories have been built. From here supplies and equipment go out to the front line. By now all the agricultural areas of England are under control of the Liberation Front. The soldiers and peasants are organized in communes, the women farming and looking after the children while the men are fighting. Their

leaders are young. There are few old people here. Everywhere morale is high, they are confident that they have won the war and that the Americans must soon leave. They are Scottish, Welsh, people from the northern and western provinces of England, West Indians, Asians and Africans. For four years they have been bombed but they are still fighting.

COOKHAM

Cut to Captain Robinson on the turret of his tank.

He scans the empty fields. Nothing moves. In the compound below the soldiers have finished readying their weapons and equipment. The *World in Action* commentator puts on US combat clothing, strapping a gun around his waist, trying out heavy boots. A helicopter clatters overhead.

AFN radio announcer

. . . in the southern outskirts of London last night a guerilla unit fired a 107 mm rocket, killing one civilian and wounding four others. First Air Cav. ground elements in Operation Pegasus killed 207 enemy in scattered contacts yesterday, with friendly casualties light. First Division Marines killed 124 in two separate battles in Northern Province. The leathernecks ambushed enemy elements, calling in support by artillery and air attack. The marines took no casualties while killing 156 communists . . .

Commentator

Half an hour from now the forty men of Alpha Company will set out from Cookham. As we move off across this guerilla-infested countryside two companies of combat engineers will have flown in to the target area by helicopter. They will deal with any local opposition. The main function of Alpha Company, this so-called pacification probe, is to re-establish the government's authority. The thirty British soldiers and the District Administrator will stay on after the Americans have left, recruiting local militia, setting up a fortified hamlet and redirecting the area's agriculture. The target area is at a key point on the M4 Motorway to the south-west. To keep this road open the government forces are setting up a chain of fortified villages along its 200-mile length.

CAPTAIN ROBINSON CHECKING HIS MEN'S EQUIPMENT

Commentator

Alpha Company's commander, Captain Arjay Robinson, is already a veteran of this war. Thirty-two years old, he comes from Denver, Colorado, and is a graduate of West Point. He is married to a clergyman's daughter and has three children, none of whom he has seen in the two years he has been here. A career soldier, he has already decided to stay here until the Americans leave.

SERGEANT PALEY CHECKING TANK TREADS

Commentator

His second-in-command is Sergeant Carl W. Paley, a 26-year-old bachelor from Stockton, California, where he was general manager of a local radio

station owned by his father. Like Captain Robinson, he has had almost no contact with the ordinary people of this country. To him they form a grey background of blurred faces – girls he meets in the bars outside the base camps, old men who clean out the barracks or serve as waiters in the sergeants' mess. Apart from the prostitutes, the only young English people he will see are likely to be in the sights of his guns. Last month Alpha Company was involved in a major action in which over 250 enemy soldiers were killed, a third of them women auxiliaries. But to Sergeant Paley they are merely 'Charley' – a blanket term carried over from Vietnam, or 'the gooks'.

TANK ENGINE STARTS UP

American soldiers climb aboard, the British form up into a column behind it.

Commentator

As for the British troops who will go with them – like all the Americans here, Sergeant Paley holds them in little more than contempt. Underfed and ill-equipped, the British troops have to provide their own food and bedding. During the next six hours the Americans will ride to the battlefield on their tank. The thirty British will walk. Mostly men in their forties, with a few younger men drafted from the penal battalions, they represent the residue of the armies conscripted by the government three years ago, armies now decimated by casualties and desertions.

MAJOR CLEAVER

A thick-set man with British army moustache climbs on to the tank beside Captain Robinson. He wears American boots, fawn trousers, brown leather jacket and carries US Army revolver.

Commentator

The only Britisher to whom the Americans pay any attention is Major Cleaver, the District Administrator who will be in charge of the pacified village. A former regular army officer, Major Cleaver is one of several thousand DAs sent out by the British government to run the civil administration of the recaptured areas. Part political commissar, part judge and jury, Major Cleaver will literally have the power of life and death over the people living under his rule, a power that he and his fellow DAs have been quick to exercise in the past.

THE CONVOY MOVES OFF

The infantry spread out ahead and to the side of the tank. They follow a road through wooded terrain with meadows and abandoned farms on either side. Now and then there is a halt as the tank is brought up.

Captain Robinson

Helicopters are the thing that's happening these days. You can get in there real fast with heavy suppressive fire, and if you need to be pulled out you can get out real fast.

Sergeant Paley
It's definitely the way to fight a ground war.
Captain Robinson
As I see it now we're going to have two companies controlling the fire base, Bravo and Charley, who will go in by helicopter. They'll clear the landing zone by the time we get in there, so the tactical side of the operation should be finalized. It's also better from the psychological aspect that we don't get involved on the tactical side too much.
Commentator
You mean the actual fighting around the village?
Captain Robinson
That's correct.

RADIO OPERATOR PASSES MESSAGE TO CAPTAIN ROBINSON
Tank halts.
Commentator
But for Bravo and Charley Companies, who are supposed to be going in by helicopter, today is not the day for fighting a war. The weather in the target area has closed in, and the helicopters have returned to base. Alpha Company gets ready to move on alone, every man here hoping that the weather will clear.
Sergeant Paley
This country, weather's the main thing. It rains a lot and you're very wet most of the time, but you know as a soldier you can't ask for a certain territory to fight on because you just have to make the best of what terrain you have.
Commentator
Sergeant, what do you think of the chances of peace here?
Sergeant Paley
Well, I think they're . . . I don't know, as I see it as long as Charley's got a weapon and some ammo and using it he's not going to give up. I think he's pretty much got his heart in it, giving his own people a hard time here.
Commentator
How do you feel it's all going?
Sergeant Paley
Well, it's going well for the Cavs, I know that. Wherever we go we run into Charley – I know he doesn't last very long.
Commentator
Tell me, sergeant, why are you in England?
Sergeant Paley
Why am I in England? Well, curiosity, I guess. I just wanted to know what the war was like.
Commentator
What is the war like?
Sergeant Paley

Well, it's all right, I guess. For a year I'd say it's a good experience. You really learn a lot from it.

Major Cleaver

Naturally one hopes that peace will come to the country as soon as possible. Positions have become very entrenched during the past year, there's a legacy of bitterness on both sides. This is not the kind of civil war that resolves anything.

Commentator

What about the fighting itself? Don't you find it difficult to be shooting at your own people?

Major Cleaver

They're not our own people any longer. This is the whole point of the war. They're the enemy now, and peace isn't going to turn them overnight into our friends.

Commentator

But aren't there a lot of desertions from the army?

Major Cleaver

Not as many as there used to be. Most of the men realize that conditions here are a lot better than they are on the other side. The bombing has killed hundreds of thousands of people. Sitting here eating C rations is a lot more comfortable than being boiled alive in napalm.

THE COLUMN MOVES ON

Slow penetration of forest on either side of the road. We see the tank stuck in a small stream. Cameo shots of individual American and British soldiers. Fade to early afternoon.

A long shot of farmland and the motorway on the left, the village to the right. Nothing moves. The camera turns and we see the American and British troops dug in along the edge of the field facing the village. It has been raining but the sky has cleared. Everything is very quiet. Machine-guns and weapons being set up. The tank is hidden in trees. Captain Robinson scans the low sky through binoculars.

Commentator

Three o'clock the same afternoon. Alpha Company has arrived at its objective. No signs of the helicopters, so Captain Robinson and his men will have to go in alone. How many Liberation Front soldiers are facing us? Perhaps fifty, perhaps a hundred. Will they fight? Or will they fade away into the surrounding countryside, leaving their women and children behind until night comes again?

THE AMERICANS AND BRITISH ARE WATCHING QUIETLY

A farmer appears and walks along a pathway on the far side of the field. He carries a rifle over his shoulder. Sergeant Paley watches him cross the sights of his machine-gun. Nobody moves.

THE VILLAGE IS COMING TO LIFE AFTER THE RAIN-STORM

Young men and women appear. They go about their work. A stall is set up and food is distributed. Young mothers in their khaki mini-skirts drop their children into the communal crèche. Others move towards the fields and farm buildings with rifles over their shoulders. A damp Union Jack is run up on the village flag-pole. Meanwhile, the American and British government forces watch quietly over their gun-sights. Through the zoom lens we focus on individual soldiers, and then on individual villagers in their sights: a young man with a headband who is the kibbutz leader; his girlfriend with a baby; a coloured girl with a pistol on her waist. The leader speaks through a megaphone, the sounds just carrying across the field. He is making some kind of joke, and everyone in the village laughs.

THE FIRST FARMERS WALK OUT ACROSS THE FIELD

They are still unaware of the government forces, and carry their rifles slung casually over their shoulders. One of them, a young Pakistani, has spotted something moving across the field. He follows it between the cabbages, then bends down and picks it up. It is an American cigarette pack. Puzzled, he looks up. Ten feet away he sees the barrel of a light machine-gun aimed at him by Sergeant Paley. Crushing the pack in his hand, he opens his mouth to shout.

CAPTAIN ROBINSON SIGNALS

Sergeant Paley opens fire straight at the young Pakistani. Torn apart, he falls among the cabbages. Massive firing breaks out. The other young men and women in the field are shot down. Mortar fire is directed at the village, the tank lumbers forward, its heavy gun opening fire. Through the long-distance lens we see isolated men and women being shot down, others running for shelter. The food stall is overturned. A barn is burning. Captain Robinson signals again, and the men move forward in a general advance, firing as they go. The *World in Action* commentator and Major Cleaver move up with them, taking shelter behind the tank. Counter fire is coming from the village, from a small blockhouse built behind a bicycle shed. Two British soldiers are shot down. In the village now everything is burning. Bodies lie around, there are burning motorcycles and food scattered everywhere.

EVERYTHING IS QUIET

The battle has been over an hour or so. A few fires are still burning, smoke drifting towards the distant motorway. The British government troops break down the doors of the houses. They stare at the lines of bodies, mostly young women and children. Six prisoners have their hands wired together. The remaining villagers are driven out into the field.

2nd Commentator

Two hours ago, in the attack on this small village beside the M4, the *World in Action* commentator was killed. As he followed the first wave of American soldiers he was shot by an unknown enemy sniper and within a few minutes died of his wounds. His report on this war has been shown as he made it.

VILLAGERS SQUATTING IN FIELD

GIs prepare demolition charges.

2nd Commentator

Alpha Company prepares to pull out. The weather has closed in again, and there will be no support coming in by helicopter. The action is called off at the request of Major Cleaver. Ten British soldiers have been killed or wounded. Without the Americans and their tank he could never hold the village.

Captain Robinson

We're moving them out, just generally get them out of the way. You can bomb their houses flat easier that way without the conscience of the people on your mind. Put them out in the field.

EXPLOSIONS RIP APART VILLAGE BUILDINGS

Close-up of bodies of rebel soldiers dragged along in mud behind the tank. The column pulls out through the dusk, heading back to Cookham.

Major Cleaver

To help another human being out, it's worth the expense and loss of life. It's just that I sometimes wonder whether some of the people that I know who have died knew what they were dying for. That's about the hardest thing to think of, you know. If a man doesn't know why he's dying, it's a bad way to go.

Acknowledgment: For all the dialogue above, to General Westmoreland, President Thieu of South Vietnam, Marshall Ky and various journalists, US and ARVN military personnel.

1977

HAVING A WONDERFUL TIME

3 July 1985. Hotel Imperial, Playa Inglaterra, Las Palmas

We arrived an hour ago after an amazing flight. For some reason of its own the Gatwick computer assigned us to first-class seats, along with a startled dentist from Bristol, her husband and three children. Richard, as ever fearful of flying, took full advantage of the free champagne and was five miles high before the wheels left the ground. I've marked our balcony on the twenty-seventh floor. It's an extraordinary place, about twenty miles down the coast from Las Palmas, a brand-new resort complex with every entertainment conceivable, all arranged by bedside push-button. I'm just about to dial an hour's water-skiing, followed by Swedish massage and the hairdresser! *Diana.*

10 July. Hotel Imperial

An unbelievable week! I've never crammed so much excitement into a few days – tennis, scuba-diving, water-skiing, rounds of cocktail parties. Every evening a group of us heads for the boîtes and cabarets along the beach, ending up at one or more of the five nightclubs in the hotel. I've hardly seen Richard. The handsome cavalier in the picture is the so-called Beach Counsellor, a highly intelligent ex-public relations man who threw it all in two years ago and has been here ever since. This afternoon he's teaching me to hang-glide. Wish me happy landings! *Diana.*

17 July. Hotel Imperial

The times of sand are running out. Sitting here on the balcony, watching Richard ski-chute across the bay, it's hard to believe we'll be in Exeter tomorrow. Richard swears the first thing he'll do is book next year's holiday. It really has been an amazing success – heaven knows how they do it at the price, there's talk of a Spanish government subsidy. In part it's the unobtrusive but highly sophisticated organization – not a hint of Butlins, though it's British-run and we're all, curiously, from the West Country. Do you realize that Richard and I have been so busy we haven't once bothered to visit Las Palmas? (Late news-flash: Mark Hastings, the Beach Counsellor, has just sent orchids to the room!) I'll tell you all about him tomorrow. *Diana.*

18 July. Hotel Imperial

Surprise! That computer again. Apparently there's been some muddle

at the Gatwick end, our aircraft won't be here until tomorrow at the earliest. Richard is rather worried about not getting to the office today. We blew the last of our traveller's cheques, but luckily the hotel have been marvellous, thanks largely to Mark. Not only will there be no surcharge, but the desk-clerk said they would happily advance us any cash we need. Hey-ho . . . A slight let-down, all the same. We walked along the beach this afternoon, together for the first time. I hadn't realized how vast this resort complex actually is – it stretches for miles along the coast and half of it's still being built. Everywhere people were coming in on the airport buses from Sheffield and Manchester and Birmingham, within half an hour they're swimming and water-skiing, lounging around the hundreds of pools with their duty-free Camparis. Seeing them from the outside, as it were, it's all rather strange. *Diana.*

25 July. Hotel Imperial

Still here. The sky's full of aircraft flying in from Gatwick and Heathrow, but none of them, apparently, is ours. Each morning we've waited in the lobby with our suitcases packed, but the airport bus never arrives. After an hour or so the desk-clerk rings through that there's been a postponement and we trudge back to another day by the pool, drinks and water-skiing on the house. For the first few days it was rather amusing, though Richard was angry and depressed. The company is a major Leyland supplier, and if the axe falls, middle-management is the first to feel it. But the hotel have given us unrestricted credit, and Mark says that as long as we don't go over the top they'll probably never bother to collect. Good news: the company have just cabled Richard telling him not to worry. Apparently hordes of people have been caught the same way. An immense relief – I wanted to phone you, but for days now all the lines have been blocked. *Diana.*

15 August. Hotel Imperial

Three more weeks! Hysterical laughter in paradise . . . the English papers flown in here are full of it, no doubt you've heard that there's going to be a government inquiry. Apparently, instead of flying people back from the Canaries the airlines have been sending their planes on to the Caribbean to pick up the American holiday traffic. So the poor British are stuck here indefinitely. There are literally hundreds of us in the same boat. The amazing thing is that one gets used to it. The hotel people are charm itself, they've pulled out all the stops, organizing extra entertainments of every kind. There's a very political cabaret, and an underwater archaeology team are going to raise a Spanish caravel from the sea floor. To fill in the time I'm joining an amateur theatrical group, we're thinking of putting on *The Importance of Being Ernest.* Richard takes it all with surprising calm. I wanted to post this from Las Palmas, but there are no buses running, and when we set out on foot Richard and I lost ourselves in a maze of building sites. *Diana.*

5 September. Hotel Imperial

No news yet. Time moves like a dream. Every morning a crowd of bewildered people jam the lobby, trying to find news of their flights back. On the whole, everyone's taking it surprisingly well, showing that true British spirit. Most of them, like Richard, are management people in industry, but the firms, thank heavens, have been absolutely marvellous and cabled us all to get back when we can. Richard comments cynically that with present levels of industrial stagnation, and with the Government footing the bill, they're probably glad to see us here. Frankly, I'm too busy with a hundred and one activities to worry – there's a sort of mini-Renaissance of the arts going on. Mixed saunas, cordon bleu classes, encounter groups, the theatre, of course, and marine biology. Incidentally, we never did manage to get into Las Palmas. Richard hired a pedalo yesterday and set off up the coast. Apparently the entire island is being divided into a series of huge self-contained holiday complexes – human reserves, Richard called them. He estimates that there are a million people here already, mostly English working class from the north and midlands. Some of them have apparently been here for a year, living quite happily, though their facilities are nowhere as good as ours. Dress rehearsal tonight. Think of me as Lady Bracknell – it's mortifying that there's no one else quite mature enough to play the part, they're all in their twenties and thirties, but Tony Johnson, the director, an ex-ICI statistician, is being awfully sweet about it. *Diana.*

6 October. Hotel Imperial

Just a brief card. There was a crisis this morning when Richard, who's been very moody recently, finally came into collision with the hotel management. When I went into the lobby after my French conversation class a huge crowd had gathered, listening to him rant away at the desk clerks. He was very excited but extremely logical in a mad way, demanding a taxi (there are none here, no one ever goes anywhere) to take him into Las Palmas. Balked, he insisted on being allowed to phone the Governor of the Islands, or the Swiss Consul. Mark and Tony Johnson then arrived with a doctor. There was a nasty struggle for a moment, and then they took him up to our room. I thought he was completely out, but half an hour later, when I left the shower, he'd vanished. I hope he's cooling off somewhere. The hotel management have been awfully good, but it did surprise me that no one tried to intervene. They just watched everything in a glazed way and wandered back to the pool. Sometimes I think they're in no hurry to get home. *Diana.*

12 November. Hotel Imperial

An extraordinary thing happened today – I saw Richard for the first time since he left. I was out on the beach for my morning jog when there he was, sitting by himself under an umbrella. He looked very tanned and healthy,

but much slimmer. He calmly told me a preposterous story about the entire Canaries being developed by the governments of Western Europe, in collusion with the Spanish authorities, as a kind of permanent holiday camp for their unemployables, not just the factory workers but most of the management people too. According to Richard there is a beach being built for the French on the other side of the island, and another for the Germans. And the Canaries are only one of many sites around the Mediterranean and Caribbean. Once there, the holiday-makers will never be allowed to return home, for fear of starting revolutions. I tried to argue with him, but he casually stood up and said he was going to form a resistance group, then strode away along the beach. The trouble is that he's found nothing with which to occupy his mind – I wish he'd join our theatre group, we're now rehearsing Pinter's *The Birthday Party. Diana.*

10 January 1986. Hotel Imperial

A sad day. I meant to send you a cable, but there's been too much to do. Richard was buried this morning, in the new international cemetery in the hills overlooking the bay. I've marked his place with an X. I'd last seen him two months ago, but I gather he'd been moving around the island, living in the half-constructed hotels and trying unsuccessfully to set up his resistance group. A few days ago he apparently stole an unseaworthy motor-boat and set off for the African coast. His body was washed ashore yesterday on one of the French beaches. Sadly, we'd completely lost touch, though I feel the experience has given me a degree of insight and maturity which I can put to good use when I play Clytemnestra in Tony's new production of *Electra.* He and Mark Hastings have been pillars of strength. *Diana.*

3 July 1986. Hotel Imperial

Have I really been here a year? I'm so out of touch with England that I can hardly remember when I last sent a postcard to you. It's been a year of the most wonderful theatre, of parts I would once never have dreamed of playing, and of audiences so loyal that I can hardly bear the thought of leaving them. The hotels are full now, and we play to a packed house every night. There's so much to do here, and everyone is so fulfilled, that I rarely find the time to think of Richard. I very much wish you were here, with Charles and the children – but you probably are, at one of the thousand hotels along the beach. The mails are so erratic, I sometimes think that all my cards to you have never been delivered, but lie unsorted with a million others in the vaults of the shabby post office behind the hotel. Love to all of you. *Diana.*

1978

ONE AFTERNOON AT UTAH BEACH

'Do you realize that we're looking down at Utah Beach?'

As he took off his boots and weather cape, David Ogden pointed through the window at the sea wall. Fifty yards from the villa the flat sand ran along the Normandy coast like an abandoned highway, its right shoulder washed by the sea. Every half-mile a blockhouse of black concrete presented its shell-pocked profile to the calm Channel.

Small waves flicked at the empty beach, as if waiting for something to happen.

'I walked down to the war memorial,' Ogden explained. 'There's a Sherman there – an American tank – some field guns and a commemorative plaque. This is where the US First Army came ashore on D-Day. Angela . . . ?'

Ogden turned from the window, expecting his wife to comment on his discovery. She and Richard Foster, the pilot who had flown them over to Cherbourg for a week at this rented villa, sat at either end of the velvet settee, watching Ogden with a curious absence of expression. Dressed in their immaculate holiday wear, brandy glasses motionless in their hands as they listened politely, they reminded him of two mannequins in a department store tableau.

'Utah Beach . . .' Angela gazed in a critical way at the deserted sand, as if expecting a military exercise to materialize for her and fill it with landing craft and assault troops. 'I'd forgotten about the war. Dick, do you remember D-Day?'

'I was two.' Foster stood up and strolled to the window, partly blocking Ogden's view. 'My military career began a little later than yours, David.' Glancing down at Ogden, who was now staring at a blockhouse six hundred yards away, he said, 'Utah Beach – well, you wanted some good shooting. Are you sure this isn't Omaha, or one of the others – Juno, Gold, what were they called?'

Without any intended rudeness, Ogden ignored the younger man. His face was still numb from the sea air, and he was intent on his communion with the empty sand and the blockhouses. Walking along the beach, he had been surprised by the size of these concrete monsters. He had expected a chain of subterranean pill-boxes hiding within the sea wall, but many of them were massive fortresses three storeys high, larger than the parish churches in the nearby towns. The presence of the blockhouses, like the shells of the steel pontoons embedded in the wet sand, had pulled an

unsuspected trigger in his mind. Like all examples of cryptic architecture, in which form no longer revealed function – Mayan palaces, catacombs, Viet Cong sanctuaries, the bauxite mines at Les Baux where Cocteau had filmed *Le Testament d'Orphée* – these World War II blockhouses seemed to transcend time, complex ciphers with a powerful latent identity.

'Omaha is further east along the coast,' he told Foster matter-of-factly. 'Utah Beach was the closest of the landing grounds to Sainte-Mère-Église, where the 82nd Airborne came down. The marshes we shoot across held them up for a while.'

Foster nodded sagely, his eyes running up and down Ogden's slim but hyperactive figure for what seemed the hundredth time that day. Throughout their visit Foster appeared to be sympathetically itemizing a catalogue of his defects, without in any way being insolent. Staring back at him, Ogden reflected in turn that for all the hours Foster had logged as a salesman of executive jets his sallow face remained remarkably pallid as if he were plagued by some deep *malaise*, some unresolvable contradiction. By noon a dark stain seemed to leak from his mouth on to his heavy chin, a shadow that Foster had once described to Angela as a blue tan from spending too much time in bars.

As if separating the two men like a referee, Angela came to the window. 'For someone who's never been in the army or heard a shot fired in anger, David's remarkably well-informed about military matters.'

'Isn't he – for a non-combatant,' Foster agreed. 'And I don't mean that in any critical spirit, David. I spent five years in the army and no one ever told me who won the battle of Waterloo.'

'Weren't you a helicopter pilot?' Ogden asked. 'Actually, I'm not all that interested in military history . . .'

Strictly speaking, this wasn't true, Ogden admitted to himself during lunch, though in fact he had not thought of the D-Day beaches when Angela first suggested the week in Normandy. Under the pretext of a demonstration flight in the twin Comanche, Foster had offered to fly them gratis, though his real reasons were hard to define. The whole trip was surrounded by ambiguities, motives hidden inside each other like puzzle boxes.

This curious threesome – the aircraft salesman, the provincial film critic in his late forties, and the young wife ten years his junior, a moderately successful painter of miniatures – sat in this well-appointed villa beside a long-forgotten battleground as if unsure what had brought them here. Curious, not because of any confrontation that might occur, any crime of passion, but because three people so ill-assorted had formed such a stable relationship. At no time during the six months since their meeting at the San Sebastian festival had there been the slightest hint of tension, though Ogden was sure everyone took for granted that his wife and Richard Foster were well into an affair. However, for various reasons Ogden doubted this. For her own security Angela needed someone around her who had achieved a modest degree of failure.

His young wife . . . Ogden repeated the phrase to himself, realizing as he watched Angela's sharper chin and more prominent jaw muscles, the angular shoulders inside the chiffon blouse, that she was not all that young any more. Soon she would be older than he had been when they first met.

'I'm taking Angela into Sainte-Mère,' Foster told him after lunch. 'Do you want to come along, David? We can try the calvados.'

As usual, Ogden declined. The walk that morning had exhausted him. He stretched out in an armchair and watched the slack sea shrug itself against the beach. He was aware of the complex timetable of apparently arbitrary journeys that Foster and his wife embarked upon each day, but for the moment his attention was held by the blockhouse six hundred yards away. Despite the continuous sunlight the concrete was drenched in spray, gleaming like wet anthracite as if generating its own weather around itself.

An hour after his wife and Foster had gone, Ogden pulled on his boots. He had recovered from the lunch, and the silent villa with its formal furniture felt like the stage-set of a claustrophobic drama. The strong afternoon light had turned the beach into a brilliant mirror, a flare-path beckoning him to some unseen destination.

As he neared the blockhouse Ogden visualized himself defending this battered redoubt against the invading sea. An immense calm presided over the cool beach, as if nothing had happened in the intervening thirty years. The violence here, the scale of the conflict between the German armies and the allied armada, had pre-empted any further confrontation, assuaging his own unease about Foster and his wife.

Fifty yards from the blockhouse he climbed the scrub-covered dune that rose to its seaward flank. The sand was scattered with worn-out shoes, cycle tyres and fragments of wine bottles and vegetable crates. Generations of tramps had used these old forts as staging-posts on their journeys up and down the coast. The remains of small fires lay on the steps of the concrete staircase at the rear of the blockhouse, and pats of dried excrement covered the floor of the munitions store.

Ogden walked across the central gunnery platform of the blockhouse, a rectilinear vault large enough to house a railway locomotive. From here a heavy-calibre naval gun had lobbed its shells at the invasion fleet. A narrow stairway set into the solid wall climbed to the observation deck, and gave access to the barbette of a small-arms weapons platform below the roof. Ogden climbed the stairway, tripping twice in the darkness. The worn concrete was slick with moisture sweating from its black surface.

As he stood on the roof, lungs pumping in the cold air, the sea already seemed far below, the villa hidden behind its high privet hedges. Looking around, though, he immediately noticed the white Pallas parked behind the sea wall two hundred yards along the beach. The car was the same colour as the Citroën they had hired in Cherbourg, and Ogden took for

granted that it was their own vehicle. A tall man in a hunting jacket was steering a woman companion along the broken ground behind the wall. They approached a wooden boathouse at the end of a slipway above the beach, and Ogden could see clearly the patterns of the woman's musquash fur and recognize her gesture as she reached a gloved hand to the man's elbow.

Ogden stepped down into the stairwell. Watching them calmly, his shoulders hidden by the parapet, he knew that he had deliberately encouraged Angela and Richard Foster to come together. His own solitary walks, the private excursions he had made to the D-Day museum at Arromanches, had been part of a confused and half-conscious attempt to bring matters to a head and force a decision on himself.

Yet when he saw them unlocking the door of the boathouse together, briefly embracing in the sunlight as if openly trying to provoke him, Ogden felt a profound sense of loss. He knew too that the months of self-control had been wasted, and that from the beginning he had deluded himself that all was well.

Without thinking, he turned quickly from the parapet. With luck he could pack, call a taxi and have caught the ferry from Cherbourg before they returned to the villa. He started to run down the concrete steps, lost his footing on the damp diagonal sills, and fell backwards down the stairway on to the floor of the barbette ten feet below.

Sitting in the half-light against the wet concrete wall, Ogden massaged his bruised hands. By luck he had been able to protect his head, but he could feel the raw skin of his arms and shoulders. Some sort of viscous oil stained his fawn trousers, and a leather button torn from his jacket lay like a burst chestnut at the foot of the stairway. Immediately to his left was the embrasure of the fire-sill, the quiet beach below. There was no movement from the boathouse, and the white Pallas was still parked behind the sea wall.

At this moment Ogden realized that he was not the only person keeping a close watch on the beach. Six feet away from him, almost hidden by his grey uniform in the shadows behind the parapet, a man lay against the concrete wall. He was resting on one elbow, face turned towards the open sea, and at first Ogden assumed that he was dead. His blond hair had been bleached to an almost arctic pallor. He appeared to be no more than nineteen or twenty years old, his pale skin stretched across the bony points of his face like wet parchment around a skull.

His thin legs, encased in a pair of heavy boots and ragged serge trousers, stuck out in front of him like poles strung with rags. Lying diagonally across them, its long barrel supported by a bipod, was a light machine-gun, stock pressed against the young man's right shoulder. Around him, arranged like the décor of a shabby military display, were an empty mess tin, a spent ammunition belt, the half-rotted remains of a field pack and webbing, and a grease-stained ground sheet.

A few feet from Ogden, lying on the fire-sill within his reach, was a spring-action flare-pistol of a type he had seen only the previous afternoon in the D-Day museum at Arromanches. He recognized it immediately, like the uniform and equipment of this young Wehrmacht soldier whose corpse he had stumbled upon, in some way preserved by the freezing air, or perhaps by the lime leaking from the hastily mixed concrete. Curiously, the machine-gun still appeared to be in working order, a spiked bayonet fitted under the barrel, the butt-stock and receiver greased and polished.

Confused by this macabre discovery, Ogden had already forgotten his wife's infidelity. He was about to pick up the flare-pistol and fire it over the parapet in the direction of the boathouse. But as his bruised hand touched the frozen butt Ogden became aware that the young soldier's eyes were watching him. Of a blanched blue from which almost all pigment had been washed away, they had turned from the beach and were examining Ogden with a tired but steady gaze. Although the soldier's white hands still lay passively at his sides, his right shoulder had moved against the wall, swinging the machine-gun fractionally towards Ogden.

Too frightened to speak, Ogden sat back, taking in every detail of the German's equipment, every ammunition round and piece of webbing, every pore in the cold skin of this young soldier still defending his blockhouse on Utah Beach as he had done in 1944.

After a moment, to Ogden's relief, the machine-gun barrel turned towards the sea. The German had shifted his position slightly, and was once again scanning the beach. His left hand moved to his face, as if he were hoping to transfer a morsel of food to his mouth, and then fell to the floor. A ragged bandage circled his chest, covering a blackened wound partly hidden by his tunic. He took no notice of Ogden as the latter climbed to his feet, both hands pressed to the wall as if frightened that it might collapse on him at any time.

But as Ogden stepped over the machine-gun a white claw moved across the floor, about to seize his ankle.

'*Hören Sie . . .*' The voice was flat, as if coming off an almost erased recording tape. '*Wieviel Uhr ist es?*' He looked up with a kind of exhausted impatience. '*Verstehen Sie? Quelle heure . . . ? Aujourd'hui? Hier?*' Dismissing Ogden with a wave, he murmured, '*Zu viel Larm . . . zu viel Larm . . .*'

Pulling the stock of the machine-gun into his shoulder, he stared along its barrel at the beach below.

Ogden was about to leave, when a movement on the beach caught his eye. The boathouse door had opened. Richard Foster stepped into the sunlight, and swung his arms lazily in the cool air as he waited until Angela appeared thirty seconds later. Together they walked across the dunes to the parked Pallas, climbed into the car and drove off.

Ogden paused by the staircase, watching the young soldier with the machine gun. He realized that the German had seen neither Foster nor his wife. The boathouse and sea wall were hidden from him by the parapet

of the barbette. But if he recovered from his wounds, and moved forward to the edge of the fire-sill . . .

By the time he reached the villa ten minutes later Ogden had already decided on both the tactics and strategy of what he knew would be the last military action of World War II.

'Have you seen the blankets from the children's room?' Angela flicked through the inventory, her sharp eyes watching her husband as he played chess with himself by the sitting-room window. 'I didn't bother to check them when we arrived, but Mme Saunier insists they're missing.'

Ogden looked up from the chessboard. As he shook his head he glanced at the blockhouse. For the three days since his discovery the suspense had become exhausting; at any moment he expected a wounded Wehrmacht soldier to appear on the roof among the wheeling gulls, a pink blanket around his shoulders. At lunch he had changed his place, sitting by himself further down one side of the table so that he could keep the blockhouse under observation.

'Perhaps they were never there,' he said. 'We can replace them.'

'They were here all right. Mme Saunier is scrupulous about this sort of thing. She also said something about one of the decanters. David, are you in a trance?'

Irritably, Angela pushed her blonde hair from her forehead, then gave up and picked up her coat. Richard Foster was waiting by the car in the drive, one of the two shotguns they had hired cradled under his arm. Ogden noticed that he had taken to carrying the weapon everywhere with him, almost as if he detected a change of atmosphere in the villa. In fact, Ogden had gone to strenuous lengths to maintain the good humour of the first days of their holiday.

He waited patiently for them to leave. Half an hour later Mme Saunier set off in her Simca. When the sounds of the car had faded Ogden stood up and moved swiftly across the villa to the conservatory at the rear of the dining room. He removed the pots of bright winter plants standing on the wooden dais, eased back the platform from the wall and pulled out the cheap suitcase he had bought in Sainte-Mère that morning while Angela and Foster were lounging over the breakfast table. Taking the blankets from the empty bedroom had been a mistake, but at the time he had been concerned only to keep the young soldier alive.

Inside the suitcase were adhesive tape, sterile lint and antiseptic cream, one bottle of Vichy water and a second of schnapps, a primus stove, six cans of assorted soup, and a pull-through he had purchased from the town's gunsmith. However carefully the German had oiled the machine-gun, its barrel would need a thorough reaming-out.

After checking the contents, Ogden replaced the dais and let himself through the conservatory doors. Protected by the high privets, the garden was warm, and the air coming off the beach had an almost carnival sparkle. As usual, though, by the time he reached the blockhouse the temperature

had dropped by almost ten degrees, as if this black concrete redoubt existed within a climatic zone of its own.

Ogden paused by the staircase, listening for the sounds of any intruders. On the first afternoon, when he had snatched the children's blankets, flung together an emergency meal of bread, milk and salami, and raced back along the beach to the blockhouse, the German had relapsed into one of the intermittent comas into which he would sink without warning. Although still staring at the tide-line, right hand clasped around the trigger butt of the machine-gun, his face was so cold and pallid that Ogden at first thought he had died. But he revived at the sound of the milk pouring into his mess tin, sat up and allowed Ogden to drape the blankets around his shoulders. Unable to stay more than an hour for fear of alerting his wife, Ogden had spent the evening in a state of hyper-excitability, for some reason terrified that the local police and members of a German military mission might arrive at any moment.

By the next morning, after Ogden had taken the car to Sainte-Mère on the pretext of visiting the war cemeteries there, the German had visibly improved. Although barely aware of Ogden, he leaned more comfortably against the damp wall. He held the mess tin against his bandaged chest, picking at the remains of the sausage. His face had more colour, and the skin was less tightly stretched against the jaw and cheekbones.

The German was often irritated by Ogden's fumbling, and there was something strangely vulnerable about his extreme youth. Ogden visited him twice each day, bringing water, food and cigarettes, whatever he could smuggle out of the villa under the suspicious eyes of Mme Saunier. He would have liked to light a fire for the soldier, but the primus stove he had brought with him on this fourth morning would generate a little warmth. However, the German had survived in this cold – the thought of living through all those winters made Ogden shudder – and at least the summer was coming.

When he climbed the stairway to the barbette the German was sitting up, blankets around his shoulders, quietly cleaning the machine-gun. He nodded to Ogden, who sat panting on the cold floor, and continued to strip the breech, apparently uninterested in the primus stove. When Ogden handed over the pull-through the German glanced at him with a flicker of appreciation. He ate only when he had reassembled the weapon.

Ogden watched him approvingly, relieved to see the young soldier's total dedication to his defence of this lonely strongpoint. It was this kind of courage that Ogden most admired. Earlier he had feared that once the German had recovered his strength he might decide to leave, or fall back to a more defensible position. Clearly he had missed the actual landings on Utah Beach and had no idea that he alone was keeping the war going. Ogden had no intention of telling him the truth, and the German's resolve never wavered.

Despite his overall improvement, the German's legs still seemed useless, and he had not moved forward sufficiently to see the boathouse two

hundred yards away. Each afternoon Angela and Richard Foster climbed the dunes to this wooden shack on its miniature wheels, and disappeared into it for an hour. At times, as he waited for them to emerge, Ogden was tempted to wrest the machine-gun from the wounded German and empty its ammunition belt through the flaking weather-board. But the young soldier's aim was probably sharper and more steady. The flare-pistol lay on the fire-sill, the shell in its barrel. When the German had cleaned it they would be ready.

Two days later, soon after one o'clock in the afternoon, began the last military engagement to take place on Utah Beach.

At eleven o'clock that morning, as Angela sat at the breakfast table reading the local French newspaper, Richard Foster returned from the telephone in the hall.

'We'll have to leave this afternoon. The weather's closing in.'

'What?' Ogden left his chess table and joined them in the dining room. He pointed to the brilliant sunlight falling on the wet satin of the beach. 'It doesn't look like it.'

'I've just talked to the met. people at Cherbourg Airport. There's a front coming in from the Scillies. The barometer's going up like a lift.'

Ogden clasped his hands, trying to control them. 'Well, let's put it off for a day. The plane's fully instrumented.'

'Not a chance. By this time tomorrow the Channel will be packed with cumulo-nimbus. It'll be like trying to fly through a maze of active volcanoes.'

'Dick knows what he's doing,' Angela confirmed. 'I'll read the inventory with Mme Saunier after lunch. She can take the keys to the agents when we've gone.' To Ogden, who was still staring uncertainly at Richard Foster, she said, 'A day won't matter, David. You've done nothing all week but play about on the beach by yourself.'

For the next half an hour Ogden tried to find some excuse for them to stay, pacing up and down the sitting room as suitcases were dragged around upstairs. He tried to shut the two women's voices out of his mind, realizing that his entire scheme was about to fall to pieces. Already he had made his morning visit to the blockhouse, taking coffee, soup and cigarettes. The young German had almost recovered, and had moved the machine-gun closer to the parapet. Now Ogden would have to leave him there. Within days he would realize that the war was over and hand himself in to the French authorities.

Behind him the front door closed. Ogden heard Foster's voice in the drive, Angela calling to him about something. He watched them from the window, in a flat way admiring their nerve. They were setting off for their last walk together, Foster holding Angela's elbow in one hand, the shotgun in the other.

Still surprised by the blatant way in which they were advertising their affair – during the past two days they had done everything but get into Angela's bed together – Ogden pressed his hands against the window. A

faint chance still remained. He remembered the almost provocative way in which Angela had watched him across the dining table the previous evening, confident that he would do absolutely nothing . . .

Fifteen minutes later Ogden had left the house and an exasperated Mme Saunier, and was running head down, shotgun in hand, through the pools of water which the stiffening sea had swilled across Utah Beach.

'Langsamer! Zu schnell. Langsam . . .'

Trying to calm Ogden, the young German raised a white hand and gestured him away from the parapet. He reached forward and shifted the bipod, swinging the machine-gun to take in the section of beach containing the boathouse, at which Ogden had been gesticulating since his arrival.

Ogden crouched against the wall, only too ready to let the German take command. The young soldier's recovery in the space of a few days had been remarkable. Though his hands and face retained their albino-like whiteness, he seemed almost to have put on weight. He moved easily around the fire-sill, in complete control of his heavy weapon. The bolt was cocked back, trigger set for automatic fire. A kind of wan smile, an ironic grimace, hung about his cold mouth, as if he too knew that his long wait was about to come to an end.

Ogden nodded encouragingly, holding his shotgun in as military a grip as he could muster. Its fire-power was nothing by comparison with the German's machine-gun, but it was all he could offer. In some obscure way he felt obligated to this young soldier, and guilty at implicating him in what would in a sense be the last war crime committed during World War II.

'They're – Look!' Ogden ducked behind the parapet, gesturing frantically. The boathouse door had opened, a cracked glass pane throwing a blade of sunlight at them. Ogden lifted himself on to his knees, the flare-pistol in both hands. The German had come to life, moving with professional command, all trace of his injuries forgotten. He adjusted his rear sight, his bandaged shoulder traversing the heavy weapon. Angela and Richard Foster stepped through the door of the boathouse. They paused in the sunlight, Foster casually inspecting the nearby dunes. The shotgun rested on his shoulder, trigger guard clasped around two fingers.

Unnerved for a moment by this aggressive stance, Ogden raised the flare-pistol, cocked the trigger and fired the fat shell into the air over Foster's head. The pilot looked up at its weak parabola, then ran forward, shouting to Angela as the shell lost height and fell like a dead bird into the calm sea.

'A dud . . . !' Angry with himself, Ogden stood up in the embrasure, his head and chest exposed. Raising the shotgun, he fired the left barrel at Foster, who was darting through the dunes little more than a hundred yards from the blockhouse. Beside Ogden the young German was taking aim. The long barrel of the machine-gun followed the running figure. At last he opened fire, the violent noise jarring the parapet. Ogden

was standing in the embrasure, happily listening to the roar of the machine-gun, when Richard Foster stood up in the long grass ten yards from the blockhouse and shot him through the chest.

'Is he . . . ?'

Angela waited in the dim light by the stairway, the collar of her fur coat pressed against her cheeks. Avoiding the body on the floor of the barbette, she watched Foster rest his shotgun against the wall and kneel on the floor.

'Stand back as far as you can.' Foster waved her back. He examined the body, then touched the flare-pistol with a blood-stained shoe. He was still shaking, both from fear and from the exhaustion of the past week. By contrast, Angela was completely calm. He noticed that with characteristic thoroughness she had insisted on climbing the stairway.

'It's a damn lucky thing he fired that first, I might not have had time otherwise . . . But where the hell did he find it? And all this other equipment?'

'Let's leave and call the police.' Angela waited, but Foster was still searching the floor. 'Dick! An hour from now I may not sound very convincing.'

'Look at this gear – World War II webbing, machine-gun ammunition, primus stove, German phrase-book and all these cans of soup . . .'

'He was camping here. I told you it would take a lot to provoke him.'

'Angela!' Foster stepped back and beckoned her towards him. 'Look at him . . . For God's sake, he's wearing a German uniform. Boots, tunic, the whole thing.'

'Dick!'

As they made their way from the blockhouse, the alarmed figure of Mme Saunier was hurrying along the beach towards them. Foster held Angela's arm.

'Now. Are you all right?'

'Of course.' With a grimace, Angela picked her way down the grimy concrete steps. 'You know, he must have thought we were coming ashore. He was always talking about Utah Beach.'

1978

ZODIAC 2000

Author's note

An updating, however modest, of the signs of the zodiac seems long overdue. The houses of our psychological sky are no longer tenanted by rams, goats and crabs but by helicopters, cruise missiles and intra-uterine coils, and by all the spectres of the psychiatric ward. A few correspondences are obvious – the clones and the hypodermic syringe conveniently take the place of the twins and the archer. But there remains the problem of all those farmyard animals so important to the Chaldeans. Perhaps our true counterparts of these workaday creatures are the machines which guard and shape our lives in so many ways – above all, the taurean computer, seeding its limitless possibilities. As for the ram, that tireless guardian of the domestic flock, his counterpart in our own homes seems to be the Polaroid camera, shepherding our smallest memories and emotions, our most tender sexual acts. Here, anyway, is an s-f zodiac, which I assume the next real one will be . . .

The Sign of the Polaroid

The skies were sliding. Already the first of the television crews had arrived in the hospital's car park and were scanning the upper floors of the psychiatric wing through their binoculars. He lowered the plastic blind, exhausted by all this attention, the sense of a world both narrowing and expanding around him. He waited as Dr Vanessa adjusted the lens of the cine-camera. Her untidy hair, still uncombed since she first collected him from the patients' refectory, fell across the view-finder. Was she placing the filter of her own tissues between herself and whatever threatening message the film might reveal? Since Professor Rotblat's arrival in the Home Office limousine she had done nothing but photograph him obsessively during a range of meaningless activities – studying the tedious Rorschach images, riding the bicycle in the physiology laboratory, squatting across the bidet in her apartment. Why had they suddenly picked him out, an unknown long-term patient whom everyone had ignored since his admission ten years earlier? Throughout his adolescence he had often stood on the roof of the dormitory block and taken the sky into himself, but not even Dr Vanessa had noticed. Pushing back her blonde hair, she looked at him with unexpected concern. 'One last reel, and then you must pack – the helicopter's coming for us.' All night she had sat with him on her bed, projecting the films on to the wall of the apartment.

The Sign of the Computer

He sat at the metal desk beside the podium, staring at the hushed faces of the delegates as Professor Rotblat gestured with the print-outs. 'A routine cytoplasmic scan was performed six months ago on the patients of this obscure mental institution, as part of the clinical trials of a new antenatal tranquillizer. Thanks to Dr Vanessa Carrington, the extraordinary and wholly anomalous cell chemistry of the subject was brought to my attention, above all the laevo-rotatory spiral of the DNA helix. The most exhaustive analyses conducted by MIT's ULTRAC 666, the world's most powerful computer, confirm that this unknown young man, an orphan of untraceable parentage, seems to have been born from a mirror universe, propelled into our own world by cosmic forces of unlimited power. They also indicate that in opting for its original right-hand bias our biological kingdom made the weaker of two choices. All the ULTRAC predictions suggest that the combinative possibilities of laevo-rotatory DNA exceed those of our own cell chemistry by a factor of 10^{27}. I may add that the ULTRAC programmers have constructed a total information model of this alternative universe, with implications that are both exalting and terrifying for us all . . .'

The Sign of the Clones

He steadied himself against the balcony rail, retching on to the turquoise tiles. Twenty feet below his hotel room was the curvilinear roof of the conference centre, its white concrete back like an immense occluded lens. For all Professor Rotblat's talk of alternative universes, the delegates would see nothing through that eyepiece. They seemed to be more impressed by the potency of this over-productive computer than they were by his own. So far his life had been without any possibilities at all – volleyball with the paraplegics, his shins bruised by their wheelchairs, boring hours pretending to paint like Van Gogh in the occupational therapy classes, then evenings spent with TV and largactil. But at least he could look up at the sky and listen to the time-music of the quasars. He waited for the nausea to pass, regretting that he had agreed to be flown here. The lobbies of the hotel were filled with suspiciously deferential officials. Where was Dr Vanessa? Already he missed her reassuring hands, her scent around the projection theatre. He looked up from the vomit on the balcony. Below him the television director was standing on the roof of the conference centre, waving to him in a friendly but cryptic way. There was something uncannily familiar about his face and stance, like a too-perfect reflection in a mirror. At times the man seemed to be mimicking him, trying to signal the codes of an escape combination. Or was he some kind of sinister twin, a right-hand replica of himself being groomed to take his place? Wiping his mouth, he noticed the green pill in the vomit between his feet. So the police orderly had tried to sedate him. Without thinking, he decided to escape, and picked up the

manual which the Home Office horoscopist had pushed into his hands after lunch.

The Sign of the IUD

He could smell her vulva on his hands. He lay on his side in the darkened bedroom, waiting until she returned from the bathroom. Through the glass door he could see her blurred thighs and breasts, as if distorted by some computer permutating all the possibilities of an alternative anatomy. This likeable but strange young woman, with her anonymous apartment and random conversation filled with sudden references to quasars, the overthrow of capitalism, nucleic acids and horoscopy – had she any idea what would soon happen to her? Clearly she had been waiting for him in the hotel's car park, all too ready to hide him in the jump seat of her sports car. Was she the courier of a rival consortium, sent to him by the unseen powers who presided over the quasars? On the bedside table was the intra-uterine coil, with the draw-string he had felt at the neck of her womb. On some confused impulse she had decided to remove it, as if determined to preserve at least one set of his wild genes within the safekeeping of her placental vault. He swung the coil by its draw-string, this technological cipher that seemed to contain in its double swastika an anagram of all the zodiacal emblems in the horoscopy manual. Was it a clue left for him, a modulus to be multiplied by everything in this right-handed world – the contours of this young woman's breasts, the laws of chemical kinetics, the migration song of swallows? After the camera, the computer and the clones, the coil was the fourth house of that zodiac he had already entered, the twelve-chambered mansion through which he must move with the guile of a master-burglar. He looked up as Renata gently pushed him back on to the pillow. 'Rest for an hour.' She seemed to be forwarding instructions from another sky. 'Then we'll leave for Jodrell Bank.'

The Sign of the Radar Bowl

As they waited in the stationary traffic on the crowded deck of the flyover Renata fiddled impatiently with the radio, unable to penetrate the static from the cars around them. Smiling at her, he turned off the sound and pointed to the sky over her head. 'Ignore the horizon. Beyond the Pole Star you can hear the island universes.' He sat back, trying to ignore the thousand satellite transmissions, a barbarous chatter below the great music of the quasars. Even now, through the afternoon sunlight over this provincial city, he could read the comsat relays and the radar beams of Fylingdales and the Norad line in northern Canada, and hear the answering over-the-horizon probes of the Russian sites near Murmansk, distant lions roaring their fear at each other, marking their claims to impossible territories. An incoming missile would be fixed in the cat's cradle of his mind like a fly trapped in the sound-space of a Beethoven symphony. Startled, he saw a pair of scarred hands seize the

rim of the windshield. A thick-set man with a hard beard had leapt between the airline buses and was staring at him, his left eye inflamed by some unpleasant virus. To Renata he snapped: 'Get into the back – we've only a week to the First Secretary's visit.'

The Sign of the Stripper

As the music stopped they took their seats in the front row of the strip club. Only three feet from him, on a miniature stage decorated like a boudoir, the naked couple were reaching the climax of their sex act. The bored audience hushed behind them, and he was aware of Heller watching him with an almost obsessive intensity. For days he had been numbed by the galvanic energy of this psychotic man, this terrorist with his doomsday dreams of World War III. During the past few days they had followed a deranged itinerary – airport cargo bays, the approach roads to missile silos, secret apartments packed with computer terminals and guarded by a gang of arrogant killers, hoodlum physicists trained at some deviant university. And above all, the strip clubs – he and Heller had visited dozens of these lurid cabins, watching Renata and the women members of the gang run the gamut of every conceivable sexual variation, perversions so abstract that they had become the elements in a complex calculus. Later, in their apartments, these aggressive women would sidle around him like caricatures from an erotic dream. Already he knew that Heller was trying to recruit him into his conspiracy. But were they unconsciously giving him the keys to the sixth house? He stared up at the young woman who was now leaving the stage to scattered applause, showing off the semen on her thigh. He remembered Heller's frightening violence as he grappled with the young whores in the back of the sports car, assaults as stylized as ballet movements. In the codes of Renata's body, in the junctions of nipple and finger, in the sulcus of her buttocks, waited the possibilities of a benevolent psychopathology.

The Sign of the Psychiatrist

Professor Rotblat paused as Vanessa Carrington returned from the window and stood behind the young man's chair, her hands protectively on his shoulders. His face seemed to embody the geometry of totally alien obsessions. 'The role of psychiatry today is no longer to cure the patient, but to reconcile him to his strengths and weaknesses, to balance the dark side of the sun against the light – a task, incidentally, made no easier for us by an unaccommodating nature. Theoretical physics reminds us of the inherent right-hand bias of all matter. The spin of the electron, the rotation of both the solar system and the smallest sub-atomic particles, the great tides that turn the cosmos itself, all embody this fundamental constant, reflected not only in the deep-rooted popular unease with left-handedness, but in the dextro-rotatory helix of DNA. Given the high energies involved, whether in galaxies or biological systems, any attempt at a contrary direction would have catastrophic results, of a type familiar

to us in the case of black holes. A single such individual might become the psychological equivalent of a doomsday weapon . . .' He waited for the young man to reply. Had he returned to the hospital to remind them that he had transcended the role of patient and was moving into a sinistral realm where the ULTRAC predictions should be read from right to left?

The Sign of the Psychopath

He stood by the stolen Mercedes as the women loaded the ambassador's body into the trunk. Heller was watching from the elevator doors, the heavy machine-pistol held in both hands. The terrorist's swarthy face had closed in on itself, exposing the loosening sutures around his temples. During the hours of violence in the apartment he had gripped his pistol as if masturbating himself to a continuous orgasm. The torment inflicted upon this elderly diplomat had clearly served a purpose known only to Renata and her companions. They had watched the murder with an almost dreamlike calm, as if Heller's deranged cruelty revealed the secret formulas of a new logic, a conceptualized violence that would transform the air disaster and the car crash into events of loving gentleness. Already they planned an ever-more psychotic series of spectacular adventures – the assassination of the visiting party leader, the hijacking of the plutonium convoy, the reprogramming of ULTRAC to destroy the entire commercial and banking system of the West. These women dreamed of World War III like young mothers crooning over their first pregnancies.

The Sign of the Hypodermic

He watched Dr Vanessa's reflection in the window of the control room as she adjusted the electrodes on his scalp. Her uncertain hands, with their tremor of guilt and affection, summed up all the uncertainties of this dangerous experiment conducted in the converted television studios. Despite Professor Rotblat's disapproval, she had become a willing conspirator, perhaps out of some confused hope that he would make his escape, embark from the causeways of his own spinal column and fly away across some interior sky. The television director's face swam through the heavy glass of the control room. During the previous days, as they set up the experiment in the studio laboratory, Tarrant had begun to hide behind these transparent mirrors, as if uncertain of his own reality. Yet he seemed to sympathize with the need to come to terms with this nightmare world of terrorists and cruise missiles, objects seen in a deformed mirror that might one day be reunited in a more meaningful sequence. Multiplied by the ULTRAC computer, the wave-functions of his hallucinating brain would be transmitted on the nationwide channels and provide a new set of operating formulae for their passage through consciousness. He touched Dr Vanessa's knee reassuringly as she held the hypodermic to the light.

The Sign of the Vibrator

He listened to the monotonous, insect-like buzz of the elegant machine in Renata's hand. She lay on her back, muttering some complex masturbatory fantasy to herself, for once unaware of his presence. Was she really convinced by these shudders and gasps of her own sexual fulfilment? Since his return to her apartment he had often reflected that sex offered to any would-be tyrant the easiest and most effective means of political take-over. However, he had made his own choice elsewhere. Within a few days the terrorist groups would attempt to start World War III, and the psychological year would move to its climax. Already the subliminal films were ready to be transmitted through the emergency news bulletins. Relaxed now, he looked down at Renata's straining thighs and pelvis. By the time the television transmission of this exhausting sex act had reached the nearest stars any curious observers there would assume that she was giving birth to this unpleasant machine, offspring of her marriage with the ULTRAC print-outs.

The Sign of the Cruise Missile

He knelt in front of the television set, waiting for the overdue emergency bulletins. By now the skies over central London should have been filled with helicopters, the streets deafened by the treads of armoured troop carriers, the whole panoply of nuclear alert. Waiting patiently, confident that the logic of the new zodiac would be fulfilled, he stared at the silent screen as Renata lay asleep on the bed. Deep in his mind he dreamed of cruise missiles, launched from the surfacing submarines and heading out across the lonely tundra, following the contours of remote arctic fjords. Soon he would be leaving, glad to abandon this planet to its nightmare games. He had played only a small part in this reductive drama. The true zodiac of these people, the constellations of their mental skies, constituted nothing more than a huge self-destructive machine. Leaving the set, he looked down at the young woman. As he placed his hands around her neck, ready to satisfy the faultless logic of the psychological round, he was thinking only of the cruise missiles.

The Sign of the Astronaut

Through the glass window of the isolation ward he watched Dr Vanessa speaking quietly to Professor Rotblat. Her nervous anxiety when the police returned him to the hospital had given way to no more than a neutral and professional concern. He pressed his elbows against the restraining sheet, thinking of Renata's bloodied body, with its strangely resistant anatomy that he had tried to arrange into a happier and more meaningful geometry. He knew now that he had been tricked by them all, that there had been no nuclear crisis, and that the subliminal messages had been intended only for himself. Had it all been no more than a fantasy, and was the search for the zodiac imposed upon him unintentionally by his too-sudden release from the hospital? However, Renata's body remained

more than a small clinical embarrassment. One day the murder of this intellectual woman gangster might really seed their society's destruction. He had been trapped by the zodiac they had urged him to construct, but he had escaped through the side door of this young woman's death. The great round had come full circle, raised him on its shoulder and returned him to the institution. However, they had made no allowance for a wholly unexpected contingency – his recovery of his sanity, a treasure abducted from the twelve mansions. Now he would leave them, and take the left-handed staircase to the roof above his mind, and fly away across the free skies of his inner space.

1978

MOTEL ARCHITECTURE

Pangborn's suspicion that someone was hiding in the solarium coincided with the arrival of the young repairwoman. The presence of this smartly uniformed but bored girl rattling her metal valise around his wheelchair so frayed his nerves that at first he made no attempt to find the intruder. Her aggressive manner, the interminable whistling she kept up as she wiped the television screens, and her growing interest in Pangborn were unlike anything he had previously had to deal with.

The uniformed women sent by the company to maintain the services within the solarium had been noted for their silence and efficiency. Looking back at the twelve years he had spent in the solarium, Pangborn could hardly recall a single face. In fact, the absence of any kind of personal identity allowed the young women to carry out their intimate chores. Yet even within the hour of her first visit this new recruit had managed to damage the tuning control of the master screen and unsettle Pangborn with her moody gaze. But for this vague and unsettling criticism of him Pangborn would have identified the intruder far earlier and avoided the strange consequences that were to follow.

At the time he had been sitting in his chair in the centre of the solarium, bathing in the warm artificial light that flowed through the ceiling vents and watching the shower sequence from *Psycho* on the master screen. The brilliance of this *tour de force* never ceased to astonish Pangborn. He had played the sequence to himself hundreds of times, frozen every frame and explored it in close-up, separately recorded sections of the action and displayed them on the dozen smaller screens around the master display. The extraordinary relationship between the geometry of the shower stall and the anatomy of the murdered woman's body seemed to hold the clue to the real meaning of everything in Pangborn's world, to the unstated connections between his own musculature and the immaculate glass and chromium universe of the solarium. In his headier moments Pangborn was convinced that the secret formulas of his tenancy of time and space were contained somewhere within this endlessly repeated clip of film.

So immersed had he been in the mysterious climax of the sequence – the slewing face of the actress pressed against the tiled floor with its rectilinear grid – that at first he ignored the faint noise of breathing nearby, the half-familiar smell of a human being.

Pangborn turned in his wheelchair, expecting to find someone standing

behind him, perhaps one of the delivery men who provisioned the solarium's kitchen and fuel tanks. After twelve years of living entirely on his own, Pangborn had discovered that his senses were sharp enough to detect the presence of a single fly.

Freezing the film on the television screens, he swung his chair and turned his back to them. The circular chamber was empty, like the uncurtained bathroom and kitchen.

But the air had moved, somewhere behind him a heart had beaten, lungs had breathed.

At this moment a key turned in the entrance hall, the glass door was banged back by a clumsily carried vacuum-cleaner, and Vera Tilley made her first appearance.

For all his intimacy with the electronic image of the naked film actress, Pangborn had not looked a real woman in the face for more than ten years. Still unsettled by the suspected intruder, he watched the uniformed girl drop her vacuum-cleaner on to the carpet and root about in her tool-kit. She was barely twenty, with untidy blonde hair pushed up into her cap, eccentric make-up applied to her already large mouth and eyes. On her lapel was an identification badge – under the company's heraldic device was the name 'Vera Tilley' and a photograph of her staring at the camera with a cheeky pout.

She now gazed at Pangborn and the solarium in the same provocative way.

'When you're ready you can carry on,' Pangborn told her. 'I'm busy at the moment.'

'So I can see.' The girl eyed the complex of screens, the huge blow-ups of the dead eyes of the actress surrounded like an electronic altar-piece by the quantified sections of her body on the smaller displays. With a wry glance at Pangborn's padded contour chair, she remarked: 'Is she comfortable up there? Can't you do something for her?' She flicked a dirty finger-nail at the control console on the arm of the chair. 'You've got enough buttons to stop the world.'

Ignoring her, Pangborn rotated the chair and returned to the screens. For the next hour, as he continued his analysis of the shower sequence, he was still thinking of the intruder. Clearly there was no one hiding in the solarium now, but the presence of this mysterious visitor might in some way be connected with the odd young woman. He could almost believe that she was some new kind of urban terrorist. He listened to her moving around the kitchen, servicing the equipment and replacing the supplies in the food dispensers. Every now and then her whistling was modulated by an ironic note.

When she had cleaned the bathroom she came back and stood between Pangborn and the screens. He could smell his cologne on her wrists.

'Time to switch off the life-support system,' she said goodhumouredly. 'Can you survive for five minutes on your own?'

Pangborn waited impatiently while she swung each of the television sets from the wall and tuned its controls. As he watched this young woman at work, kneeling in front of him on the carpet, he felt strangely vulnerable. Her breathing, her plump calves, the coarse vitality of her body, made him wish that it were possible to dispense with any need to maintain the solarium. He had been celibate for the past fifteen years, and his confused feelings unsettled him. He preferred the secure realities of the television screens to the endlessly bizarre fictions of ordinary life. At the same time Vera Tilley intrigued him. He thought again of the intruder.

'See you next week,' she told him as he signed the work schedule. While she packed her valise she watched him with some concern. 'Don't you ever get tired of looking at those old films? You ought to go out once in a while. My brother owns a taxi if you ever want one.'

Pangborn waved her away, his eyes on the magnified image of the bathroom floor and the strange contours of the film actress's cheekbones. But when the door opened he called out: 'Tell me, I meant to ask – when you arrived, was there anyone waiting outside?'

'Only if he was invisible.' Puzzled by Pangborn's deliberately casual tone, she weighed the valise in her strong hand, as if about to take out her screwdriver and turn down his over-active image control. 'You're alone here, Mr Pangborn. Perhaps you saw a ghost . . .'

After she had gone Pangborn lay back in his chair and scanned through the afternoon's public television programmes. With her slapdash manner, the girl had mistuned the master screen, dappling everything with an intermittent interference pattern, but for once Pangborn was able to ignore this. He turned off the sound and watched the dozens of programmes move past silently.

Once again, unmistakably, he was aware of the presence of someone nearby. The faint voice of another human being hung on the air, the spoor of an unfamiliar body. There was an odd but not unpleasant odour in the solarium. Pangborn left the screens and drove the wheelchair around the chamber, inspecting the kitchen, hall and bathroom. He could see that the solarium was empty, but at the same time he was convinced that someone was watching him.

The girl, Vera Tilley, had unsettled him in a way he had not expected. All his experience, his years spent in front of the television screens, had not prepared him for even the briefest encounter with an actual woman. What would once have been called the 'real' world, the quiet streets outside, the private estate of hundreds of similar solaria, made no effort to intrude itself into Pangborn's private world and he had never felt any need to defend himself against it.

Looking down at himself, he realized that he had been naked during her visit. Bathed in the ceaseless light of the solarium, he had years ago given up wearing even his loin-slip. So distant and anonymous were the

repair-women usually sent by the company that he felt no embarrassment as they moved around him.

However, Vera Tilley had made him aware of himself for the first time. No doubt she had noticed just how she had aroused him. Trying not to think of her, Pangborn stiffened the back of the chair and concentrated on the television screens in front of him. Calmed by the warm light flowing across his bronzed body, he switched off the public channels and returned to his analysis of *Psycho*. The geometry of the naked actress slumped across the floor of the shower stall provided an endless source of interest, like the most abstract possible of all music, and within a few minutes he was able to lower the back of the chair, Vera Tilley and the mysterious intruder forgotten.

During his twelve years in the solarium Pangborn had never left the light-filled chamber, and recently had hardly even left the chair. For the few minutes each day which he was forced to spend standing in the bathroom he felt strangely heavy and cumbersome, his body an uncouth mass of superfluous musculature suspended as if by a bad sculptor on the slender armature of his bones. Lying back on the chair, he found it hard to believe that the sleek, bronzed figure projected by the monitor camera on to the screens in front of him was that same shaky invalid who faced him in the bathroom mirror. As far as possible Pangborn remained in the chair, wheeling himself into the kitchen, preparing his meals sitting down, in a sense remaking a small second world within the private universe of the solarium.

This spherical chamber where he seemed to have spent his entire life, asleep and awake, by now supplied all his needs, both physical and psychological. The chamber was at once a gymnasium and bedroom, library and workplace (nominally Pangborn was a television critic, virtually the only job, apart from that of the maintenance engineers, in a society where everything else was done by machine). Mounted on the rear wall of the solarium was a cluster of exercise devices which he operated for half an hour each day while sitting in the chair.

The bathroom was also equipped with a special cabinet containing a variety of sexual appliances, but for years Pangborn had been repelled by the thought of using them – they engaged him in too unsettling a way with the facts of his own body. He felt the same resistance towards the psychological maintenance devices which everyone was encouraged to air for at least an hour each day on the television screens – simulated confrontations and reconciliations with his parents, intelligence and personality tests, and a whole range of psychological games, pocket dramas in which he could play the starring role.

But Pangborn had soon become bored with the limited repertory of these charades. Fantasy and the imagination had always played little part in his life, and he felt only at home within the framework of an absolute realism. The solarium was a fully equipped television studio, in which Pangborn was simultaneously the star, script-writer and director of an

unending domestic serial of infinitely more interest than the programmes provided by the public channels. The news bulletins now were about his own body processes, the night's heart rate, the rising and falling curves of his temperature. These images, and the analysis of certain key events from his library of feature films, seemed to have some kind of profound though yet mysterious connection. The strange geometry presiding over the actress in her shower stall provided a key to that absolute abstraction of himself he had sought since his arrival at the solarium, the construction of a world formed entirely from the materials of his own consciousness.

During the next days Pangborn's peace of mind was interrupted by his growing awareness of the intruder who had entered the solarium. At first he put down his suspicions to Vera Tilley's arrival. The strongly scented cosmetics used by the young woman had released some repressed memory of his mother and sister, and of his brief and abortive marriage. But once again, as he lay back in his chair, analysing the ever larger blow-ups of the actress's face pressed against the bathroom tiles, he felt the presence of an uninvited visitor somewhere behind him. With the sound turned down he could hear the occasional breathing, even a sigh as this mysterious intruder seemed to weary of his secret vigil. Now and then Pangborn would hear a metallic creak behind him, the tension of a leather harness, and detect the faint smell of another body.

For once ignoring his television screens, Pangborn began a painstaking inspection of the solarium, starting with the hall and its storage cupboards. He pulled out the racks of cassettes, the cases filled with suits he had not worn for ten years. Satisfied that the hall provided no hiding place, he drove the wheelchair into the bathroom and kitchen, searched the medicine cabinet and shower, the narrow spaces behind the refrigerator and cooker. It occurred to him that the intruder might be some small animal which had slipped into the solarium during a visit by one of the cleaners. But as he sat motionlessly in the light-filled silence he could hear the steady breathing of a human being.

By the time of Vera Tilley's second visit Pangborn was waiting at the door of the solarium. He hoped to catch a glimpse of someone loitering outside, perhaps an accomplice of the intruder. Already he suspected that they might be members of a gang hoping to rig the television audience surveys.

'You're on my foot, Mr Pangborn! What's the matter? Don't you want me to come in today?' Pushing the door against the wheelchair, Vera looked down at Pangborn. 'You're in a state.'

Pangborn reversed into the centre of the solarium. The young woman's make-up seemed less bizarre, as if she intended to reveal more of herself to him. Realizing suddenly that he was naked, he felt his skin prickle uncomfortably.

'Did you see anyone outside? Waiting in a car, or watching the door?'

'You asked me that last week.' Ignoring his agitated condition, Vera

opened her tool-kit and began to fit together the sections of the vacuum-cleaner. 'Are you expecting someone to stay?'

'No!' The thought appalled Pangborn. Even the presence of the young woman exhausted him. He remembered the sounds of breathing behind the chair. Calming himself, he said: 'Leave the cleaning until later and have a look at the aerials. I think one of the sets is picking up a strange sound-track – perhaps from the studio next door.'

Pangborn waited while she worked away at the sets. Afterwards he followed her around the solarium in his wheelchair, watching as she cleaned the bathroom and kitchen. He peered between her legs into the shower stall and garbage disposal chute, confirming for himself that there was no one hiding there.

'You're all alone, Mr Pangborn. Just you and the TV screens.' As she locked her valise Vera watched him in a concerned way. 'Have you ever been to the zoo, Mr Pangborn?'

'What . . . ? There are wild-life programmes I sometimes review.' Pangborn waited impatiently for her to leave, relieved that he could get on with his work. Watching the dozen television screens, which the girl had tuned to a needle-like sharpness, he was suddenly convinced that the notion of an intruder had all been a delusion fostered by the unsettled presence of this young woman.

However, only a few minutes after she had gone Pangborn once again heard the sounds of the intruder behind him, and the noise of the man's breathing, even louder now as if he had decided no longer to conceal his presence from Pangborn.

Controlling himself, Pangborn took stock of the solarium. An unvarying light fell through the glass vents into this world without shadows, bathing the chamber in an almost submarine glow. He had been reviewing a programme of redubbed films – a huge repertory of transcribed classics now existed, their story lines and dialogue totally unconnected with their originals. Pangborn had been watching a tinted and redubbed version of *Casablanca*, now a new instructional film in a hotel management course on the pitfalls and satisfactions of overseas nightclub operation. Ignoring the trite dialogue, Pangborn was enjoying the timelessly elegant direction when a colour fault on the master screen began to turn the characters' faces green.

As he switched off the wall of screens, about to call the maintenance company, Pangborn heard the distinctive sounds of breathing. He froze in his chair, listening to the characteristic rise and fall of human respiration. As if aware that Pangborn was listening to him, the intruder began to breathe more heavily, the harsh, deep breaths of a man in fear.

Coolly, Pangborn kept his back to the intruder, who was hiding either in the hall or bathroom. He could not only hear but smell the man's fear, the vaguely familiar scent he had noticed the previous week. For some reason he was almost sure that the man had no intention of attacking

him, and was only trying to escape from the solarium. Perhaps he was an exhausted fugitive from some act of mis-justice, a wrongly incarcerated mental patient.

For the rest of the afternoon Pangborn pretended to watch the defective television screens, while systematically devising a method of dealing with the intruder. First of all he needed to establish the man's identity. He switched on the monitor camera that surveyed the solarium and set it on continuous traverse across the bathroom, kitchen and hall.

Pangborn then turned to setting a number of small traps. He unlocked the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, marking the positions of the antiseptic cream and Band-aids. After a deliberately early supper he left untouched a small filet steak and a bowl of salad. He placed a fresh bar of soap in the shower tray and scattered a fine mist of talc on the bathroom carpet.

Satisfied, he returned to the television screens and lay half-awake until the small hours, listening to the faint breathing somewhere behind him as he carried out his endless analysis of the murder sequence from *Psycho*. The immaculate and soundless junction of the film actress's skin and the white bathroom tiles, magnified in a vast close-up, contained the secret formulas that somewhere united his own body to the white fabric and soft chrome of his contour couch.

When he woke the next morning he once again heard the intruder's breathing, so rested that his mysterious visitor seemed almost to be part of everyday life in the solarium. Sure enough, as Pangborn had expected, all the modest traps had been sprung. The man had washed his hands with the fresh bar of soap, a small portion of the steak and salad had been eaten, a strange footprint marked the talc in the bathroom.

Unsettled by this tangible proof that he was not alone in the solarium, Pangborn stared at the footprint. The man's foot was almost the size of his own, with the same overlarge and questing big toe. Something about this similarity brought a flush of irritation to Pangborn. He felt a sudden sense of challenge, provoked by this feeling of identity with the man.

This close involvement with the intruder was redoubled when Pangborn discovered that the man had taken a book from his shelf – the almost unobtainable text of the original dialogue of *The Third Man*, now a cautionary tale put out by the world tourist authority on the perils of the language barrier. Pangborn thumbed through the pages of the scenario, half-hoping to find a further clue to the man's identity. He carefully replaced the book on the shelf. These first hints of the intruder's nature – the shared literary tastes, the shape of his feet, the sounds of his breathing and his body smell – both intrigued and provoked him.

As he played at high speed through the hours of film the solarium camera had recorded, he now and then caught what seemed to be brief glimpses of the intruder – the flash of an elbow behind the bathroom door, a shoulder framed against the medicine cabinet, the back of a head in the hall. Pangborn gazed at these magnifications, expanding them

beside the stills from *Psycho*, the systems of two parallel but coinciding geometries.

This never explicit but civilized duel between them continued during the next days. At times Pangborn felt that he was running a *ménage à deux*. He effectively cooked meals for them both – the intruder fortunately approved of Pangborn's tastes in wine, and often reinforced the night with small measures of Pangborn's brandy. Above all, their intellectual tastes coincided – their interests in film, in abstract painting, and in the architecture of large structures. Indeed, Pangborn almost visualized them openly sharing the solarium, embarking together on their rejection of the world and the exploration of their absolute selves, their unique time and space.

All the more bitter, therefore, were Pangborn's reactions when he discovered the intruder's attempt to kill him.

Too stunned to reach for the telephone and call the police, Pangborn stared at the bottle of sleeping tablets. He listened to the faint breathing somewhere behind him, lower now as if the intruder were holding his breath, waiting for Pangborn's response.

Ten minutes earlier, while drinking his morning coffee, Pangborn had at first ignored its faintly acrid flavour, presumably some new spice or preservative. But after a few more sips he had almost gagged. Carefully emptying the cup into the wash-basin, he discovered the half-dissolved remains of a dozen plastic capsules.

Pangborn reached into the medicine cabinet and opened the now empty bottle of sleeping tablets. He listened to the faint breathing in the solarium. At some point, while his back was turned, the intruder had slipped the entire contents into his coffee.

He forced himself to vomit into the basin, but still felt queasy when Vera arrived an hour later.

'You look fed up,' she told him cheerfully. She nodded at the books scattered around the place. 'I can see you've been reading again.'

'I'm lending some books to a friend,' Pangborn reversed his chair away from her as she ambled around the chamber with her valise. Under the seat of his chair he held the handle of a vegetable knife. Looking up at the girl's over-bright make-up and guileless eyes it was hard to believe that she might be in collusion with the intruder. At the same time he was surprised that she could not hear the obvious sounds of the man's breathing. Once again Pangborn was amazed by his nimbleness, his ability to move from one end of the solarium to the other without leaving more than a few fragments of his presence on the monitor film. He assumed that the man had found a secure hiding place, perhaps in a service shaft unknown to Pangborn.

'Mr Pangborn! Are you awake?'

With an effort, Pangborn rallied himself. He looked up to find Vera kneeling in front of him. She had pushed back her cap and was shaking his knees. He searched for the knife handle.

'Mr Pangborn – all those pills in the bathroom. What are they doing?'

Pangborn gestured vaguely. Concerned only to find a weapon, he had forgotten to wash away the capsules.

'I dropped the bottle in the basin – be careful you don't cut your hands.'

'Mr Pangborn –' Confused, Vera stood up and straightened her cap. She glanced disapprovingly at the huge blow-ups from *Psycho* on the television screens, and at the blurred fragments of shoulder and elbow recorded by the solarium camera. 'It's like a jig-saw. Who is it? You?'

'Someone else – a friend who's been visiting me.'

'I thought so – the place is in a mess. The kitchen . . . Have you ever thought of getting married, Mr Pangborn?'

He stared at her, aware that she was deliberately being coquettish, trying to unsettle him for his own sake. Once again his skin began to scream.

'You ought to get out of here more,' she was telling him sensibly. 'Visit your friend. Do you want me to come tomorrow? It's on my route. I can say your aerials need tuning.'

Pangborn reversed around her, keeping an eye on the bathroom and kitchen. Vera hesitated before leaving, searching for an excuse to prolong her stay. Pangborn was certain that this amiable scatter-brain was not an accomplice of the intruder, but if he once divulged the man's presence, let alone the murder attempt, she would probably panic and then provoke an openly homicidal assault.

Controlling his temper, he waited until she left. But any irritation he felt was soon forgotten when a second attempt was made on his life.

As with the first murder attempt, Pangborn noticed that the method chosen was both devious and clumsy. Whether because he was still half-doped by the sleeping pills, or out of sheer physical bravado, he felt no sense of panic, but only a calm determination to beat the intruder at his own game. A complex duel was taking place between them, its fragmentary course displayed in a lengthening series of giant blow-ups on the screens – his own suspicious hands a few feet from the camera, the intruder's angular shoulder silhouetted against the kitchen door, even a portion of an ear reflected in the mirror of the medicine cabinet. As Pangborn sat in his chair, comparing sections of this visual jig-saw with the elements from the shower sequence in *Psycho*, he knew that sooner or later he would assemble a complete picture of the intruder.

Meanwhile, the man's presence became ever more evident. The smell of his body filled the solarium and stained the towels in the bathroom. He openly helped himself to the food in the refrigerator, scattering shreds of salad on the floor. Tirelessly, Pangborn maintained his round-the-clock surveillance, trying to shake off the effects of the sleeping pills. So determined was he to defeat the intruder that he took for granted that the water in the bathroom tank had been fouled with cleaning soda. Later, in the kitchen, as he bathed his stinging face with mineral water, he

could hear the self-satisfied breathing of the intruder, celebrating another small deceit.

Later that night, as he lay half-asleep in front of the television screens, he woke with a start to feel the hot breath of the stranger against his face. Startled, he looked round in the flickering light to find the vegetable knife on the carpet and a small wound on his right knee.

For the first time a foul smell pervaded the solarium, an unpleasant blend of disinfectant, excrement and physical rage, like the atmosphere of some ill-maintained psychiatric institution.

Retching on to the carpet beside his chair, Pangborn turned his back to the television screens. Holding the vegetable knife in front of him, he headed for the hall. He unlocked the front door, waiting for the cool night air to invade the solarium. Leaving the door ajar, he wheeled himself to the telephone beside the screens.

As he held the severed flex in his hands he heard the hall door close quietly. So the intruder had decided to leave, resigning from their duel even though Pangborn was now unable to contact the outside world.

Pangborn looked at the screens, regretting that he would never complete the jig-saw. The foul smell still hung on the air, and Pangborn decided to take a shower before going out to use a neighbour's telephone.

But as he entered the bathroom he could see clearly the bloody rents in the shower curtain. Pulling it back, he recognized the body of the young repair-woman, lying face down on the tiled floor, and the familiar postures he had analysed in a thousand blow-ups.

Appalled by the calm expression in Vera's eyes, as if she had known full well the role in which she had been cast, Pangborn reversed his chair into the solarium. He gripped the knife, feeling her wounds in the pain in his leg, and aware once again of the deep breathing around him.

Everything now, in this final phase, was in close-up. After recording the position of the girl's body with his portable camera – the film would be vital evidence for the investigating police – Pangborn sat in front of the wall of screens. He was certain that the last confrontation was about to take place between himself and the intruder. Holding the knife in his hand, he waited for the imminent attack. The sounds in the solarium seemed amplified, and he could hear the intruder's pumping lungs and feel his frightened pulse drumming through the floor into the arms of his chair.

Pangborn waited for him to come, his eyes on the screen, the monitor camera focused directly upon himself. He watched the huge close-ups of his own body, of the film actress on the floor of her bathroom, and of Vera's sprawled form entangled with the white shower curtains. As he adjusted the controls, moving these areas of tile and flesh into ever-closer focus, Pangborn felt himself rising beyond anger into an almost sexual lust for the intruder's death, the first erotic impulse he had known since he had

begun watching these television screens so many years earlier. The smell of the man's body, the beat of his pulse and hot breath seemed to be moving towards an orgasmic climax. Their collision when it came in the next few minutes would be an act of intercourse, which would at last provide the key he needed.

Pangborn held the knife, watching the whitening screens, anonymous rectangles of blank skin that formed a fragmented sky. Somewhere among them the elements of the human form still remained, a residual nexus of contour and texture in which Pangborn could at last perceive the unmistakable outline of the stranger's face.

Eyes fixed upon the screens, he waited for the man to touch him, certain that he had mesmerized the intruder with these obsessive images. He felt no hostility towards the man, and was aware now that over the years in the solarium he had become so detached from external reality that even he himself had become a stranger. The odours and sounds that disgusted him were those of his own body. All along, the intruder in the solarium had been himself. In his search for absolute peace he had found one last limiting obstacle – the intrusive fact of his own consciousness. Without this, he would merge forever into the universe of the infinite close-up. He was sorry for the young woman, but it was she who had first provoked him into his disgust with himself.

Eager now to merge with the white sky of the screen, to find that death in which he would be rid forever of himself, of his intruding mind and body, he raised the knife to his happy heart.

1978

A HOST OF FURIOUS FANCIES

Don't look now, but an unusual young woman and her elderly companion are sitting down behind us. Every Thursday afternoon they leave the Casino and come here to the café terrace of the Hotel de Paris, always choosing the same two tables near the magazine kiosk. If you lean forward you can see the girl in the restaurant mirror, the tall and elegant one with the too-level gaze and that characteristic walk of rich young women who have been brought up by nuns.

The man is behind her, the seedy-looking fellow with the once-handsome face, at least twenty years older, though you probably think thirty. He wears the same expensive but ill-fitting grey suit and silver tie, as if he has just been let out of some institution to attend a wedding. His eyes follow the secretaries returning from their lunches, plainly dreaming of escape. Observing his sad gaze, one not without a certain dignity, I can only conclude that Monte Carlo is a special kind of prison.

You've seen them now? Then you will agree it's hard to believe that these two are married, and have even achieved a stable union, though of a special kind, and governed by a set of complex rituals. Once a week she drives him from Vence to Monte Carlo in their limousine, that gold-tinted Cadillac parked across the square. After half an hour they emerge from the Casino, when he has played away at the roulette wheels the few francs he has been given. From the kiosk of this café terrace she buys him the same cheap magazine, one of those dreadful concierge rags about servant girls and their Prince Charmings, and then sips at her citron pressé as they sit at separate tables. Meanwhile he devours the magazine like a child. Her cool manner is the epitome of a serene self-assurance, of the most robust mental health.

Yet only five years ago, as the physician in charge of her case, I saw her in a very different light. Indeed, it's almost inconceivable that this should be the same young woman whom I first came across at the Hospice of Our Lady of Lourdes, in a state of utter mental degeneration. That I was able to cure her after so many others had failed I put down to an extraordinary piece of psychiatric detection, of a kind that I usually despise. Unhappily, however, that success was bought at a price, paid a hundred times over by the sad old man, barely past his forty-fifth year, who drools over his trashy magazine a few tables behind us.

Before they leave, let me tell you about the case . . .

* * *

By chance, it was only the illness of a colleague that brought me into contact with Christina Brossard. After ten years of practice in Monaco as a successful dermatologist I had taken up a part-time consultancy at the American Clinic in Nice. While looking through the out-patients' roster of an indisposed colleague I was told by his secretary that a 17-year-old patient, one Mlle Brossard, had not arrived for her appointment. At that moment one of the nursing sisters at the Our Lady of Lourdes Hospice at Vence – where the girl had been under care for three years – telephoned to cancel the consultation.

'The Mother Superior asks me to apologize to Prof. Derain but the child is simply too distraught again.'

I thought nothing of it at the time, but for some reason – perhaps the girl's name, or the nun's use of 'again' – I asked for the clinical notes. I noticed that this was the third appointment to be cancelled during the previous year. An orphan, Christina Brossard had been admitted to the Hospice at the age of fourteen after the suicide of her father, who had been her only guardian since the death of her mother in an air-crash.

At this point I remembered the entire tragedy. A former mayor of Lyon, Gaston Brossard was a highly successful building contractor and intimate of President Pompidou's, a millionaire many times over. At the peak of his success this 55-year-old man had married for the third time. For his young bride, a beautiful ex-television actress in her early twenties, he had built a sumptuous mansion above Vence. Sadly, however, only two years after Christina's birth the young mother had died when the company aircraft taking her to join her husband in Paris had crashed in the Alpes Maritimes. Heart-broken, Gaston Brossard then devoted the remaining years of his life to the care of his infant daughter. All had gone well, but twelve years later, for no apparent reason, the old millionaire shot himself in his bedroom.

The effects on the daughter were immediate and disastrous – complete nervous collapse, catatonic withdrawal and a slow but painful recovery in the nearby Hospice of Our Lady of Lourdes, which Gaston Brossard had generously endowed in memory of his young wife. The few clinical notes, jotted down by a junior colleague of Derain's who had conscientiously made the journey to Vence, described a recurrent dermatitis, complicated by chronic anaemia and anorexia.

Sitting in my comfortable office, beyond a waiting room filled with wealthy middle-aged patients, I found myself thinking of this 17-year-old orphan lost high in the mountains above Nice. Perhaps my anti-clerical upbringing – my father had been a left-wing newspaper cartoonist, my mother a crusading magistrate and early feminist – made me suspicious of the Hospice of Our Lady of Lourdes. The very name suggested a sinister combination of faith-healing and religious charlatanry, almost expressly designed to take advantage of a mentally unbalanced heiress. Lax executors and unconcerned guardians would leave the child ripe for exploitation, while her carefully preserved illness would guarantee the continued flow of whatever funds had been earmarked for the Hospice in Gaston Brossard's

will. As I well knew, dermatitis, anorexia and anaemia were all too often convenient descriptions for a lack of hygiene, malnutrition and neglect.

The following weekend, as I set off for Vence in my car – Prof. Derain had suffered a mild heart attack and would be absent for a month – I visualized this wounded child imprisoned above these brilliant hills by illiterate and scheming nuns who had deliberately starved the pining girl while crossing their palms with the dead man's gold dedicated to the memory of the child's mother.

Of course, as I soon discovered, I was totally in error. The Hospice of Our Lady of Lourdes turned out to be a brand-new, purpose-built sanatorium with well-lit rooms, sunny grounds and a self-evident air of up-to-date medical practice and devotion to the well-being of the patients, many of whom I could see sitting out on the spacious lawns, talking to their friends and relatives.

The Mother Superior herself, like all her colleagues, was an educated and intelligent woman with a strong, open face and sympathetic manner, and hands – as I always immediately notice – that were not averse to hard work.

'It's good of you to come, Dr Charcot. We've all been worried about Christina for some time. Without any disrespect to our own physicians, it's occurred to me more than once that a different approach may be called for.'

'Presumably, you're referring to chemotherapy,' I suggested. 'Or a course of radiation treatment? One of the few Betatrons in Europe is about to be installed at the Clinic.'

'Not exactly . . .' The Mother Superior walked pensively around her desk, as if already reconsidering the usefulness of my visit. 'I was thinking of a less physical approach, Dr Charcot, one concerned to lay the ghosts of the child's spirit as well as those of her body. But you must see her for yourself.'

It was now my turn to be sceptical. Since my earliest days as a medical student I had been hostile to all the claims made by psychotherapy, the happy hunting ground of pseudo-scientific cranks of an especially dangerous kind.

Leaving the Hospice, we drove up into the mountains towards the Brossard mansion, where the young woman was allowed to spend a few hours each day.

'She's extremely active, and tends to unsettle the other patients,' the Mother Superior explained as we turned into the long drive of the mansion, whose Palladian façade presided over a now silent fountain terrace. 'She seems happier here, among the memories of her father and mother.'

We were let into the imposing hall by one of the two young nuns who accompanied the orphaned heiress on these outings. As she and the

Mother Superior discussed a patient to be released that afternoon I strolled across the hall and gazed up at the magnificent tapestries that hung from the marbled walls. Above the semi-circular flights of the divided staircase was a huge Venetian clock with ornate hands and numerals like strange weapons, guardians of a fugitive time.

Beyond the shuttered library a colonnaded doorway led to the dining room. Dustcovers shrouded the chairs and table, and by the fireplace the second of the nuns supervised a servant-girl who was cleaning out the grate. A visiting caretaker or auctioneer had recently lit a small fire of deeds and catalogues. The girl, wearing an old-fashioned leather apron, worked hard on her hands and knees, meticulously sweeping up the cinders before scrubbing the stained tiles.

'Dr Charcot . . .' The Mother Superior beckoned me into the dining room. I followed her past the shrouded furniture to the fireplace.

'Sister Julia, I see we're very busy again. Dr Charcot, I'm sure you'll be pleased by the sight of such industry.'

'Of course . . .' I watched the girl working away, wondering why the Mother Superior should think me interested in the cleaning of a fireplace. The skivvy was little more than a child, but her long, thin arms worked with a will of their own. She had scraped the massive wrought-iron grate with obsessive care, decanting the cinders into a set of transparent plastic bags. Ignoring the three nuns, she dipped a coarse brush into the bucket of soapy water and began to scrub furiously at the tiles, determined to erase the last trace of dirt. The fireplace was already blanched by the soap, as if it had been scrubbed out a dozen times.

I assumed that the child was discharging some penance repeatedly imposed by the Mother Superior. Although not wishing to interfere, I noticed that the girl's hands and wrists showed the characteristic signs of an enzyme-sensitive eczema. In a tone of slight reproof, I remarked: 'You might at least provide a pair of rubber gloves. Now, may I see Mlle Brossard?'

Neither the nuns nor the Mother Superior made any response, but the girl looked up from the soapy tiles. I took in immediately the determined mouth in a pale but once attractive face, the hair fastened fanatically behind a gaunt neck, a toneless facial musculature from which all expression had been deliberately drained. Her eyes stared back at mine with an almost unnerving intensity, as if she had swiftly identified me and was already debating what role I might play for her.

'Christina . . .' The Mother Superior spoke gently, urging the girl from her knees. 'Dr Charcot has come to help you.'

The girl barely nodded and returned to her scrubbing, pausing only to move the cinder-filled plastic bags out of our reach. I watched her with a professional eye, recalling the diagnosis of dermatitis, anorexia and anaemia. Christina Brossard was thin but not under-nourished, and her pallor was probably caused by all this compulsive activity within the

gloomy mansion. As for her dermatitis, this was clearly of that special type caused by obsessive hand-washing.

'Christina –' Sister Louise, a pleasant, round-cheeked young woman, knelt on the damp tiles. 'My dear, do rest for a moment.'

'No! No! No!' The girl beat the tiles with her soapy brush. She began to wring out the floorcloth, angry hands like bundles of excited sticks. 'There are three more grates to be done this afternoon! You told me to clean them, didn't you, Mother?'

'Yes, dear. It does seem to be what you most want to do.' The Mother Superior stepped back with a defeated smile, giving way to me.

I watched Christina Brossard continue her apparently unending work. She was clearly unbalanced, but somehow self-dramatising at the same time, as if totally gripped by her compulsion but well aware of its manipulative possibilities. I was struck both by her self-pity and by the hard glance which she now and then directed at the three nuns, as if she were deliberately demeaning herself before these pleasant and caring women in order to vent her hate for them.

Giving up for the time being, I left her mopping the tiles and returned to the hall with the Mother Superior.

'Well, Dr Charcot, we're in your hands.'

'I dare say – frankly, I'm not sure that this is a case for me. Tell me – she spends all her time cleaning out these grates?'

'Every day, for the past two years, at her own wish. We've tried to stop her, but she then relapses into her original stupor. We can only assume that it serves some important role for her. There are a dozen fireplaces in this house, each as immaculate as an operating theatre.'

'And the cinders? The bags filled with ash? Who is lighting these fires?'

'Christina herself, of course. She is burning her children's books, determined for some reason to destroy everything she read as a child.'

She led me into the library. Almost the entire stock of books had been removed, and a line of stags' heads gazed down over the empty shelves. One cabinet alone contained a short row of books.

I opened the glass cabinet. There were a few schoolgirl stories, fairy tales, and several childhood classics.

The Mother Superior stared at them sadly. 'There were several hundred originally, but each day Christina burns a few more – under close supervision, it goes without saying, I've no wish to see her burn down the mansion. Be careful not to touch it, but one story alone has remained immune.'

She pointed to a large and shabby illustrated book which had been given a shelf to itself. 'You may see, Dr Charcot, that the choice is not inappropriate – the story of Cinderella.'

As I drove back to Nice, leaving behind that strange mansion with its kindly nuns and obsessed heiress, I found myself revising my opinion of

the Mother Superior. This sensible woman was right in believing that all the dermatologists in the world would be unable to free Christina Brossard from her obsession. Clearly the girl had cast herself as Cinderella, reducing herself to the level of the lowest menial. But what guilt was she trying to scrub away? Had she played a still unknown but vital role in the suicide of her father? Was the entire fantasy an unconscious attempt to free herself of her sense of guilt?

I thought of the transparent bags filled with cinders, each one the ashes of a childhood fairy tale. The correspondences were extraordinarily clear, conceived with the remorseless logic of madness. I remembered the hate in her eyes as she stared at the nuns, casting these patient and caring women in the role of the ugly sisters. There was even a wicked stepmother, the Mother Superior, whose Hospice had benefited from the deaths of this orphan's parents.

On the other hand, where were Prince Charming, the fairy godmother and her pumpkin, the ball to be fled from at the stroke of midnight, and above all the glass slipper?

As it happened, I was given no chance to test my hypothesis. Two days later, when I telephoned the Hospice to arrange a new appointment for Christina Brossard, the Mother Superior's secretary politely informed me that the services of the Clinic, of Prof. Derain and myself, would no longer be called upon.

'We're grateful to you, doctor, but the Mother Superior has decided on a new course of treatment. The distinguished psychiatrist Dr Valentina Gabor has agreed to take on the case – perhaps you know of her reputation. In fact, treatment has already begun and you will be happy to hear that Christina is making immediate progress.'

As I replaced the receiver a powerful migraine attacked my left temple. Dr Valentina Gabor – of course I knew of her, the most notorious of the new school of self-styled anti-psychiatrists, who devoted whatever time was left over from their endless television appearances to the practice of an utterly bogus psychotherapy, a fashionable blend of post-psychoanalytic jargon, moral uplift and Catholic mysticism. This last strain had presumably gained her the approval of the Mother Superior.

Whenever I saw Dr Valentina my blood began to simmer. This glamorous blonde with her reassuring patter and the eyes of a cashier was forever appearing on television talk shows, putting forward the paradoxical notion that mental illness did not exist but nonetheless was the creation of the patient's family, friends and even, unbelievably, his doctors. Irritatingly, Dr Valentina had managed to score up a number of authenticated successes, no doubt facilitated by her recent well-publicised audience with the Pope. However, I was confident that she would receive her comeuppance. Already there had been calls within the medical profession for a discreet inquiry into her reported use of LSD and other hallucinogenic drugs.

Nonetheless, it appalled me that someone as deeply ill and as vulnerable

as Christina Brossard should fall into the hands of this opportunist quack.

You can well understand, therefore, that I felt a certain satisfaction, not to say self-approval, when I received an urgent telephone call from the Mother Superior some three weeks later.

I had heard no more in the meantime of the Hospice or of Christina. Dr Valentina Gabor, however, had appeared with remorseless frequency on Radio Monte Carlo and the local television channels, spreading her unique brand of psychoanalytic mysticism, and extolling all the virtues of being 'reborn'.

In fact, it was while watching on the late evening news an interview with Dr Gabor recorded that afternoon at Nice Airport before she flew back to Paris that I was telephoned by the Mother Superior.

'Dr Charcot! Thank heavens you're in! There's been a disaster here – Christina Brossard has vanished! We're afraid she may have taken an overdose. I've tried to reach Dr Gabor but she has returned to Paris. Could you possibly come to the Hospice?'

I calmed her as best I could and set off. It was after midnight when I reached the sanatorium. Spotlights filled the drive with a harsh glare, the patients were unsettled, peering through their windows, nuns with torches were fruitlessly searching the grounds. A nervous Sister Louise escorted me to the Mother Superior, who seized my hands with relief. Her strong face was veined with strain.

'Dr Charcot! I'm grateful to you – I only regret that it's so late . . .'

'No matter. Tell me what happened. Christina was under Dr Gabor's care?'

'Yes. How I regret my decision. I hoped that Christina might have found herself through a spiritual journey, but I had no idea that drugs were involved. If I had known . . .'

She handed me an empty vial. Across the label was Dr Gabor's florid signature.

'We found this in Christina's room an hour ago. She seems to have injected herself with the entire dosage and then driven off wildly into the night. We can only assume that she stole it from Dr Gabor's valise.'

I studied the label. 'Psilocybin – a powerful hallucinogenic drug. Its use is still legal by qualified physicians, though disapproved of by almost the entire profession. This is more than a dangerous toy.'

'Dr Charcot, I know.' The Mother Superior gestured with her worn hands. 'Believe me, I fear for Christina's soul. She appears to have been completely deranged – when she drove off in our oldest laundry van she described it to one of the patients as "her golden carriage".'

'You've called the police?'

'Not yet, Doctor.' A look of embarrassment crossed the Mother Superior's face. 'When Christina left she told one of the orderlies that she was going to "the ball". I'm told that the only ball being held tonight is Prince

Rainier's grand gala in Monaco in honour of President Giscard d'Estaing. I assume that she has gone there, perhaps confusing Prince Rainier with the Prince Charming of her fairy tale, and hoping that he will rescue her. It would be profoundly awkward for the Hospice if she were to create a scene, or even try to . . .'

'Kill the President? Or the Rainiers? I doubt it.' Already an idea was forming in my mind. 'However, to be on the safe side I'll leave for Monaco immediately. With luck I'll be there before she can cause any harm to herself.'

Pursued by the Mother Superior's blessings, I returned to my car and set off into the night. Needless to say, I did not intend to make the journey to Monaco. I was quite certain that I knew where Christina Brossard had fled – to her father's mansion above Vence.

As I followed the mountain road I reflected on the evidence that had come together – the fantasy of being a skivvy, the all-promising woman psychiatrist, the hallucinogenic drug. The entire fairy tale of Cinderella was being enacted, perhaps unconsciously, by this deranged heiress. If she herself was Cinderella, Dr Valentina Gabor was the fairy godmother, and her magic wand the hypodermic syringe she waved about so spectacularly. The role of the pumpkin was played by the 'sacred mushroom', the hallucinogenic fungus from which psilocybin was extracted. Under its influence even an ancient laundry van would seem like a golden coach. And as for the 'ball', this of course was the whole psychedelic trip.

But who then was Prince Charming? As I arrived at the great mansion at the end of its drive it occurred to me that I might be unwittingly casting myself in the role, fulfilling a fantasy demanded by this unhappy girl. Holding tight to my medical case, I walked across the dark gravel to the open entrance, where the laundry van had ended its journey in the centre of a flower-bed.

High above, in one of the great rooms facing the sea, a light flickered, as if something was being burned in a grate. I paused in the hall to let my eyes feel their way in the darkness, wondering how best to approach this distraught young woman. Then I saw that the massive Venetian clock above the staircase had been savagely mutilated. Several of the ornate numerals tilted on their mountings. The hands had stopped at midnight, and someone had tried to wrench them from the face.

For all my resistance to that pseudo-science, it occurred to me that once again a psychoanalytic explanation made complete sense of these bizarre events and the fable of Cinderella that underpinned them. I walked up the staircase past the dismembered clock. Despite the fear-crazed assault on them, the erect hands still stood upright on the midnight hour – that time when the ball ended, when the courtships and frivolities of the party were over and the serious business of a real sexual relationship began. Fearful of that male erection, Cinderella always fled at midnight.

But what had Christina Brossard fled from in this Palladian mansion?

Suppose that the Prince Charming who courted her so dangerously but so appealingly were in fact her own father. Had some kind of incestuous act involved the widowed industrialist and his adolescent daughter, herself an uncanny image of his dead wife? His revulsion and self-disgust at having committed incest would explain his apparently motiveless suicide *and* his daughter's guilt – as I knew only too well from my court attendances as an expert medical witness, far from hating the fathers who forced them to commit incest, daughters were invariably plagued by powerful feelings of guilt at their responsibility for their parent's imprisonment. So after his death she would naturally return to the house, and try to expiate that guilt as a servant-girl. And what better model for an heiress than Cinderella herself?

Drawn by the distant flames, I crossed the upstairs hallway and entered the great bedroom. It was filled with paintings of young nudes cavorting with centaurs, unmistakably Gaston Brossard's master-bedroom, perhaps where the act of incest had taken place.

Flames lifted from the fireplace, illuminating the ash-streaked face of Christina. She knelt by the grate, crooning as she fed the last of the pages torn from a familiar book of fairy tales. Head to one side, she stared at the soft blaze with overlit eyes, stroking the rough seams of the hospital tunic she wore over her bare legs.

I guessed that she was in the middle of her hallucination and that she saw herself in a resplendent gown. Yet her drifting eyes looked up at me with an expression of almost knowing calm, as if she recognized me and was waiting for me to play my role in the fable and bring it to its proper conclusion. I thought of the mutilated hands of the clock above the staircase. All that remained was to restore the glass slipper to its rightful owner.

Had I now to play the part of her rescuer? Remembering the familiar sexual symbolism of the foot, I knew that the glass slipper was nothing more than a transparent and therefore guilt-free vagina. And as for the foot to be placed within it, of course this would not be her own but that of her true lover, the erect male sexual organ from which she fled.

Reaching forward, she added the cover of the fairy tale to the dying blaze, and then looked up at me with waiting eyes. For a moment I hesitated. High on psilocybin, she would be unable to distinguish truth from fantasy, so I could play out my role and bring this psychoanalytic drama to its conclusion without any fear of professional disapproval. My action would not take place in the real world, but within that imaginary realm where the fable of Cinderella was being enacted.

Knowing my role now, and the object which I myself had to place in that glass slipper, I took her hands and drew her from her knees towards her father's bed.

I murmured: 'Cinderella . . .'

* * *

But wait – they're about to leave the terrace. You can look at them now, everyone else is staring frankly at this attractive young woman and her decrepit companion. Sitting here in the centre of Monte Carlo on this magnificent spring day, it's hard to believe that these strange events ever occurred.

It's almost unnerving – she's looking straight at me. But does she recognise me, the dermatologist who freed her from her obsession and restored her to health?

Her companion, sadly, was the only casualty of this radical therapy. As he sits hunched at his table, fumbling with himself like an old man, I can tell you that he was once a fashionable physician whom she met just before her release from the Hospice. They were married three months later, but the marriage was hardly a success. By whatever means, presumably certain methods of her own, she transformed him into this old man.

But why? Simply, that in order to make the incest fantasy credible, any man she marries, however young and princely, however charming, must become old enough to be her father.

Wait! She is coming towards this table. Perhaps she needs my help? She stands in front of the restaurant mirror looking at herself and her elderly husband, and places a hand on his shoulder.

That elegant face with its knowing smile. Let me try to shake that composure, and whisper the title of this cheap magazine on my lap.

'CINDERELLA . . .'

Her hand pats my shoulder indulgently.

'Father, it's time to go back to the Hospice. I promised the Mother Superior that I wouldn't over-tire you.'

Knowing, elegant and completely self-possessed.

'And do stop playing that game with yourself. You know it only excites you.'

And very punitive.

1980

NEWS FROM THE SUN

In the evenings, as Franklin rested on the roof of the abandoned clinic, he would often remember Trippett, and the last drive he had taken into the desert with the dying astronaut and his daughter. On impulse he had given in to the girl's request, when he found her waiting for him in the dismantled laboratory, her father's flight jacket and solar glasses in her hands, shabby mementoes of the vanished age of space. In many ways it had been a sentimental gesture, but Trippett was the last man to walk on the moon, and the untended landscape around the clinic more and more resembled the lunar terrain. Under that cyanide-blue sky perhaps something would stir, a lost memory engage, for a few moments Trippett might even feel at home again.

Followed by the daughter, Franklin entered the darkened ward. The other patients had been transferred, and Trippett sat alone in the wheelchair at the foot of his bed. By now, on the eve of the clinic's closure, the old astronaut had entered his terminal phase and was conscious for only a few seconds each day. Soon he would lapse into his last deep fugue, an invisible dream of the great tideways of space.

Franklin lifted the old man from his chair, and carried his child-like body through the corridors to the car park at the rear of the clinic. Already, however, as they moved into the needle-sharp sunlight, Franklin regretted his decision, aware that he had been manipulated by the young woman. Ursula rarely spoke to Franklin, and like everyone at the hippy commune seemed to have all the time in the world to stare at him. But her patient, homely features and uninnocent gaze disturbed him in a curious way. Sometimes he suspected that he had kept Trippett at the clinic simply so that he could see the daughter. The younger doctors thought of her as dumpy and unsexed, but Franklin was sure that her matronly body concealed a sexual conundrum of a special kind.

These suspicions aside, her father's condition reminded Franklin of his own accelerating fugues. For a year these had lasted little more than a few minutes each day, manageable within the context of the hours he spent at his desk, and at times barely distinguishable from musing. But in the past few weeks, as if prompted by the decision to close the clinic, they had lengthened to more than thirty minutes at a stretch. In three months he would be housebound, in six be fully awake for only an hour each day.

The fugues came so swiftly, time poured in a torrent from the cracked glass of their lives. The previous summer, during their first excursions into

the desert, Trippett's waking periods had lasted at least half an hour. He had taken a touching pleasure in the derelict landscape, in the abandoned motels and weed-choked swimming pools of the small town near the air base, in the silent runways with their dusty jets sitting on flattened tyres, in the over-bright hills waiting with the infinite guile of the geological kingdom for the organic world to end and a more vivid mineral realm to begin.

Now, sadly, the old astronaut was unaware of all this. He sat beside Franklin in the front seat, his blanched eyes open behind the glasses but his mind set to some private time. Even the motion of the speeding car failed to rouse him, and Ursula had to hold his shoulders as he tottered like a stuffed toy into the windshield.

'Go on, doctor – he likes the speed . . .' Sitting forward, she tapped Franklin's head, wide eyes fixed on the speedometer. Franklin forced himself to concentrate on the road, conscious of the girl's breath on his neck. This highway madonna, with her secret dream of speed, he found it difficult to keep his hands and mind off her. Was she planning to abduct her father from the clinic? She lived in the small commune that had taken over the old solar city up in the hills, Soleri II. Every morning she cycled in, bringing Trippett his ration of raisins and macrobiotic cheer. She sat calmly beside him like his young mother as he played with the food, making strange patterns on his paper plate.

'Faster, Dr Franklin – I've watched you drive. You're always speeding.'

'So you've seen me? I'm not sure. If I had a blackout now . . .' Giving in again, Franklin steered the Mercedes into the centre of the road and eased the speedometer needle towards fifty. There was a flare of headlights as they overtook the weekly bus to Las Vegas, a medley of warning shouts from the passengers left behind in a tornado of dust. The Mercedes was already moving at more than twice the legal limit. At twenty miles an hour, theoretically, a driver entering a sudden fugue had time to pass the controls to the obligatory front-seat passenger. In fact, few people drove at all. The desert on either side of the road was littered with the wrecks of cars that had veered off the soft shoulder and ended up in a sand-hill a mile away, their drivers dying of exposure before they could wake from their fugues.

Yet, for all the danger, Franklin loved to drive, illicit high-speed runs at dusk when he seemed to be alone on a forgotten planet. In a locked hangar at the air base were a Porsche and an antique Jaguar. His colleagues at the clinic disapproved, but he pursued his own maverick way, as he did in the laboratory, shielding himself behind a front of calculated eccentricity that excused certain obsessions with speed, time, sex . . . He needed the speed more than the sex now. But soon he would have to stop, already the fast driving had become a dangerous game spurred on by the infantile hope that speed in some way would keep the clock hands turning.

The concrete towers and domes of the solar city approached on their left, Paulo Soleri's charming fantasy of a self-sufficient community.

Franklin slowed to avoid running down a young woman in a sari who stood like a mannequin in the centre of the highway. Her eyes stared at the dust, a palaeontology of hopes. In an hour she would snap out of it, and complete her walk to the bus stop without realizing that time, and the bus, had passed her by.

Ursula sombrely embraced her father, beckoning Franklin to accelerate.

'We're dawdling, doctor. What's the matter? You enjoyed the speed. And so did Dad.'

'Ursula, he doesn't even know he's here.'

Franklin looked out at the desert, trying to imagine it through Trippett's eyes. The landscape was not so much desolate as derelict – the untended irrigation canals, the rusting dish of a radio-telescope on a nearby peak, a poor man's begging bowl held up to the banquet of the universe. The hills were waiting for them to go away. A crime had been committed, a cosmic misdemeanour carried on the shoulders of this fine old astronaut sitting beside him. Every night Trippett wept in his sleep. Spectres strode through his unlit dreams, trying to find a way out of his head.

The best astronauts, Franklin had noticed during his work for NASA, never dreamed. Or, at least, not until ten years after their flights, when the nightmares began and they returned to the institutes of aviation medicine which had first helped to recruit them.

Light flickered at them from the desert, and raced like a momentary cathode trace across the black lenses of Trippett's glasses. Thousands of steel mirrors were laid out in a semi-circular tract beside the road, one of the solar farms that would have provided electric current for the inhabitants of Soleri II, unlimited power donated in a perhaps too kindly gesture by the economy of the sun.

Watching the reflected light dance in Trippett's eyes, Franklin turned the car on to the service road that ran down to the farm.

'Ursula, we'll rest here – I think I'm more tired than your father.'

Franklin stepped from the car, and strolled across the white, calcinated soil towards the nearest of the mirrors. In his eye he followed the focal lines that converged on to the steel tower two hundred feet away. A section of the collector dish had fallen on to the ground, but Franklin could see images of himself flung up into the sky, the outstretched sleeves of his white jacket like the wings of a deformed bird.

'Ursula, bring your father . . .' The old astronaut could once again see himself suspended in space, this time upside down in the inverted image, hung by his heels from the yardarm of the sky.

Surprised by the perverse pleasure he took in this notion, Franklin walked back to the car. But as they helped Trippett from his seat, trying to reassure the old man, there was a clatter of metallic noise across the desert. An angular shadow flashed over their faces, and a small aircraft soared past, little more than twenty feet above the ground. It scuttled

along like a demented gnat, minute engine buzzing up a storm, its wired wings strung around an open fuselage.

A white-haired man sat astride the miniature controls, naked except for the aviator's goggles tied around his head. He handled the plane in an erratic but stylish way, exploiting the sky to display his showy physique.

Ursula tried to steady her father, but the old man broke away from her and tottered off among the mirrors, his clenched fists pummelling the air. Seeing him, the pilot banked steeply around the sun-tower, then dived straight towards him, pulling up at the last moment in a blare of noise and dust. As Franklin ran forward and pressed Trippett to the ground the plane banked and came round again in a wide turn. The pilot steered the craft with his bare knees, arms trailing at his sides as if mimicking Franklin's image in the dish above the tower.

'Slade! Calm down, for once . . .' Franklin wiped the stinging grit from his mouth. He had seen the man up to too many extravagant tricks ever to be sure what he would do next. This former air force pilot and would-be astronaut, whose application Franklin had rejected three years earlier when he was chairman of the medical appeals board, had now returned to plague him with these absurd antics – spraying flocks of swallows with gold paint, erecting a circle of towers out in the desert ('my private space programme,' he termed it proudly), building a cargo cult airport with wooden control tower and planes in the air base car park, a cruel parody intended to punish the few remaining servicemen.

And this incessant stunt flying. Had Slade recognized Franklin's distant reflection as he sped across the desert in the inverted aircraft, then decided to buzz the Mercedes for the fun of it, impress Trippett and Ursula, even himself, perhaps?

The plane was coming back at them, engine wound up to a scream. Franklin saw Ursula shouting at him soundlessly. The old astronaut was shaking like an unstuffed scarecrow, one hand pointing to the mirrors. Reflected in the metal panes were the multiple images of the black aircraft, hundreds of vulture-like birds that hungrily circled the ground.

'Ursula, into the car!' Franklin took off his jacket and ran through the mirrors, hoping to draw the aircraft away from Trippett. But Slade had decided to land. Cutting the engine, he let the microlight die in the air, then stalled the flapping machine on to the service road. As it trundled towards the Mercedes with its still spinning propeller, Franklin held off the starboard wing, almost tearing the doped fabric.

'Doctor! You've already grounded me once too often . . .' Slade inspected the dented fabric, then pointed to Franklin's trembling fingers. 'Those hands . . . I hope you aren't allowed to operate on your patients.'

Franklin looked down at the white-haired pilot. His own hands *were* shaking, an understandable reflex of alarm. For all Slade's ironic drawl, his naked body was as taut as a trap, every muscle tense with hostility. His eyes surveyed Franklin with the ever-alert but curiously dead gaze of a psychopath. His pallid skin was almost luminous, as if after ending his

career as an astronaut he had made some private pact with the sun. A narrow lap belt held him to the seat, but his shoulders bore the scars of a strange harness – the restraining straps of a psychiatric unit, Franklin guessed, or some kind of sexual fetishism.

'My hands, yes. They're always the first to let me down. You'll be glad to hear that I retire this week.' Quietly, Franklin added: 'I didn't ground you.'

Slade pondered this, shaking his head. 'Doctor, you practically closed the entire space programme down single-handed. It must have provoked you in a special way. Don't worry, though, I've started my own space programme now, another one.' He pointed to Trippett, who was being soothed by Ursula in the car. 'Why are you still bothering the old man? He won't buy off any unease.'

'He enjoys the drives – speed seems to do him good. And you too, I take it. Be careful of those fugues. If you want to, visit me at the clinic.'

'Franklin . . .' Controlling his irritation, Slade carefully relaxed his jaw and mouth, as if dismantling an offensive weapon. 'I don't have the fugues any longer. I found a way of . . . dealing with them.'

'All this flying around? You frightened the old boy.'

'I doubt it.' He watched Trippett nodding to himself. 'In fact, I'd like to take him with me – we'll fly out into space again, one day. Just for him I'll build a gentle space-craft, made of rice paper and bamboo . . .'

'That sounds your best idea yet.'

'It is.' Slade stared at Franklin with sudden concern and the almost boyish smile of a pupil before a favourite teacher. 'There is a way out, doctor, a way out of time.'

'Show me, Slade. I haven't much time left.'

'I know that, doctor. That's what I wanted to tell you. Together, Marion and I are going to help you.'

'Marion –?' But before Franklin could speak, the aircraft's engine racketed into life. Fanning the tailplane, Slade deftly turned the craft within its own length. He replaced the goggles over his eyes, and took off in a funnel of dust that blanched the paintwork of the Mercedes. Safely airborne, he made a final circuit, gave a curious underhand salute and soared away.

Franklin walked to the car and leaned against the roof, catching his breath. The old man was quiet again, his brief fit forgotten.

'That was Slade. Do you know him, Ursula?'

'Everyone does. Sometimes he works on our computer at Soleri, or just starts a fight. He's a bit crazy, trying all the time not to fugue.'

Franklin nodded, watching the plane disappear towards Las Vegas, lost among the hotel towers. 'He was a trainee astronaut once. My wife thinks he's trying to kill me.'

'Perhaps she's right. I remember now – he said that except for you he would have gone to the moon.'

'We all went to the moon. That was the trouble . . .'

Franklin reversed the Mercedes along the service road. As they set off along the highway he thought of Slade's puzzling reference to Marion. It was time to be wary. Slade's fugues should have been lengthening for months, yet somehow he kept them at bay. All that violent energy contained in his skull would one day push apart the sutures, burst out in some ugly act of revenge . . .

'Dr Franklin! Listen!'

Franklin felt Ursula's hands on his shoulder. In a panic he slowed down and began to search the sky for the returning microlight.

'It's Dad, doctor! Look!'

The old man had sat up, and was peering through the window in a surprisingly alert way. The slack musculature of his face had drilled itself into the brisk profile of a sometime naval officer. He seemed uninterested in his daughter or Franklin, but stared sharply at a threadbare palm tree beside a wayside motel, and at the tepid water in the partly drained pool.

As the car swayed across the camber Trippett nodded to himself, thoroughly approving of the whole arid landscape. He took his daughter's hand, emphasizing some conversational point that had been interrupted by a pot-hole.

'. . . it's green here, more like Texas than Nevada. Peaceful, too. Plenty of cool trees and pasturage, all these fields and sweet lakes. I'd like to stop and sleep for a while. We'll come out and swim, dear, perhaps tomorrow. Would you like that?'

He squeezed his daughter's hand with sudden affection. But before he could speak again, a door closed within his face and he had gone.

They reached the clinic and returned Trippett to his darkened ward. Later, while Ursula cycled away down the silent runways, Franklin sat at his desk in the dismantled laboratory. His fingers sparred with each other as he thought of Trippett's curious utterance. In some way Slade's appearance in the sky had set it off. The old astronaut's brief emergence into the world of time, those few lucid seconds, gave him hope. Was it possible that the fugues could be reversed? He was tempted to go back to the ward, and bundle Trippett into the car for another drive.

Then he remembered Slade's aircraft speeding towards him across the solar mirrors, the small, vicious propeller that shredded the light and air, time and space. This failed astronaut had first come to the clinic seven months earlier. While Franklin was away at a conference, Slade arrived by air force ambulance, posing as a terminal patient. With his white hair and obsessive gaze, he had instantly charmed the clinic's director, Dr Rachel Vaisey, into giving him the complete run of the place. Moving about the laboratories and corridors, Slade took over any disused cupboards and desk drawers, where he constructed a series of little tableaux, psychosexual shrines to the strange gods inside his head.

He built the first of the shrines in Rachel Vaisey's bidet, an ugly assemblage of hypodermic syringes, fractured sunglasses and blood-stained tampons. Other shrines appeared in corridor alcoves and unoccupied beds, relics of a yet to be experienced future left here as some kind of psychic deposit against his treatment's probable failure. After an outraged Dr Vaisey insisted on a thorough inspection Slade discharged himself from the clinic and made a new home in the sky.

The shrines were cleared away, but one alone had been carefully preserved. Franklin opened the centre drawer of his desk and stared at the assemblage laid out like a corpse on its bier of surgical cotton. There was a labelled fragment of lunar rock stolen from the NASA museum in Houston; a photograph taken with a zoom lens of Marion in a hotel bathroom, her white body almost merging into the tiles of the shower stall; a faded reproduction of Dali's *Persistence of Memory*, with its soft watches and expiring embryo; a set of leucotomes whose points were masked by metal peas; and an emergency organ-donor card bequeathing to anyone in need his own brain. Together the items formed an accurate anti-portrait of all Franklin's obsessions, a side-chapel of his head. But Slade had always been a keen observer, more interested in Franklin than in anyone else.

How did he elude the fugues? When Franklin had last seen him at the clinic Slade was already suffering from fugues that lasted an hour or more. Yet somehow he had sprung a trapdoor in Trippett's mind, given him his vision of green fields.

When Rachel Vaisey called to complain about the unauthorized drive Franklin brushed this aside. He tried to convey his excitement over Trippett's outburst.

'He was there, Rachel, completely himself, for something like thirty seconds. And there was no effort involved, no need to remember who he was. It's frightening to think that I'd given him up for lost.'

'It is strange – one of those inexplicable remissions. But try not to read too much into it.' Dr Vaisey stared with distaste at the perimeter camera mounted beside its large turntable. Like most members of her staff, she was only too glad that the clinic was closing, and that the few remaining patients would soon be transferred to some distant sanatorium or memorial home. Within a month she and her colleagues would return to the universities from which they had been seconded. None of them had yet been affected by the fugues, and that Franklin should be the only one to succumb seemed doubly cruel, confirming all their longstanding suspicions about this wayward physician. Franklin had been the first of the NASA psychiatrists to identify the time-sickness, to have seen the astronauts' original fugues for what they were.

Sobered by the prospect facing Franklin, she managed a conciliatory smile. 'You say he spoke coherently. What did he talk about?'

'He babbled of green fields.' Franklin stood behind his desk, staring at

the open drawer hidden from Dr Vaisey's suspicious gaze. 'I'm sure he actually saw them.'

'A childhood memory? Poor man, at least he seems happy, wherever he really is.'

'Rachel . . . !' Franklin drove the drawer into the desk. 'Trippett was staring at the desert along the road – nothing but rock, dust and a few dying palms, yet he saw green fields, lakes, forests of trees. We've got to keep the clinic open a little longer, I feel I have a chance now. I want to go back to the beginning and think everything through again.'

Before Dr Vaisey could stop him, Franklin had started to pace the floor, talking to his desk. 'Perhaps the fugues are a preparation for something, and we've been wrong to fear them. The symptoms are so widespread, there's virtually an invisible epidemic, one in a hundred of the population involved, probably another five unaware that they've been affected, certainly out here in Nevada.'

'It's the desert – topography clearly plays a part in the fugues. It's been bad for you, Robert. For all of us.'

'All the more reason to stay and face it. Rachel, listen: I'm willing to work with the others more than I have done, this time we'll be a true team.'

'That is a concession.' Dr Vaisey spoke without irony. 'But too late, Robert. You've tried everything.'

'I've tried nothing . . .' Franklin placed a hand on the huge lens of the perimeter camera, hiding the deformed figure who mimicked his gestures from the glass cell. Distorted reflections of himself had pursued him all day, as if he were being presented with brief clips from an obscene film in which he would shortly star. If only he had spent more time on Trippett, rather than on the volunteer panels of housewives and air force personnel. But the old astronaut intimidated him, touched all his feelings of guilt over his complicity in the space programme. As a member of the medical support team, he had helped to put the last astronauts into space, made possible the year-long flights that had set off the whole time-plague, cracked the cosmic hour-glass . . .

'And Trippett? Where are you going to hide him away?'

'We aren't. His daughter has volunteered to take him. She seems a reasonable girl.'

Giving in to her concern, Dr Vaisey stepped forward and took Franklin's hand from the camera lens. 'Robert – are you going to be all right? Your wife will look after you, you say. I wish you'd let me meet her. I could insist . . .'

Franklin was thinking about Trippett – the news that the old astronaut would still be there, presumably living up in Soleri II, had given him hope. The work could go on . . .

He felt a sudden need to be alone in the empty clinic, to be rid of Dr Vaisey, this well-meaning, middle-aged neurologist with her closed mind and closed world. She was staring at him across the desk, clearly unsure what to do about Franklin, her eyes distracted by the gold and silver

swallows that swooped across the runways. Dr Vaisey had always regretted her brief infatuation with Slade. Franklin remembered their last meeting in her office, when Slade had taken out his penis and masturbated in front of her, then insisted on mounting his hot semen on a slide. Through the microscope eyepiece Rachel Vaisey had watched the thousand replicas of this young psychotic frantically swimming. After ten minutes they began to falter. Within an hour they were all dead.

'Don't worry, I'll be fine. Marion knows exactly what I need. And Slade will be around to help her.'

'Slade? How on earth . . . ?'

Franklin eased the centre drawer from his desk. Carefully, as if handling an explosive device, he offered the shrine to Dr Vaisey's appalled gaze.

'Take it, Rachel. It's the blueprint of our joint space programme. You might care to come along . . .'

When Dr Vaisey had gone, Franklin returned to his desk. First, he took off his wristwatch and massaged the raw skin of his forearm. Every fifteen minutes he returned the hand of the stopwatch to zero. This nervous tic, a time-twitch, had long been a joke around the clinic. But after the onset of a fugue the accumulating total gave him a reasonably exact record of its duration. A crude device, he was almost glad that he would soon escape from time altogether.

Though not yet. Calming himself, he looked at the last pages of his diary.

> June 19 – fugues: 8-30 to 9-11 am; 11-45 to 12-27 am; 5-15 to 6-08 pm; 11-30 to 12-14 pm. Total: 3 hours.

The totals were gaining on him. June 20 – 3 hours 14 mins; June 21 – 3 hours 30 mins; June 22 – 3 hours 46 mins. This gave him little more than ten weeks, unless the fugues began to slow down, or he found that trapdoor through which Trippett had briefly poked his head.

Franklin closed the diary and stared back at the watching lens of the perimeter camera. Curiously, he had never allowed himself to be photographed by the machine, as if the contours of his body constituted a secret terrain whose codes had to be held in reserve for his last attempt to escape. Standing or reclining on the rotating platform, the volunteer patients had been photographed in a continuous scan that transformed them into a landscape of undulating hills and valleys, not unlike the desert outside. Could they take an aerial photograph of the Sahara and Gobi deserts, reverse the process and reconstitute the vast figure of some sleeping goddess, an Aphrodite born from a sea of dunes? Franklin had become obsessed with the camera, photographing everything from cubes and spheres to cups and saucers and then the naked patients themselves, in the hope of finding the dimension of time locked in those undulating spaces.

The volunteers had long since retired to their terminal wards, but their photographs were still pinned to the walls – a retired dentist, a police sergeant on the Las Vegas force, a middle-aged hair stylist, an attractive mother of year-old twins, an air-traffic controller from the base. Their splayed features and distorted anatomies resembled the nightmarish jumble seen by all patients if they were deliberately roused from their fugues by powerful stimulants or electric shock – oozing forms in an elastic world, giddying and unpleasant. Without time, a moving face seemed to smear itself across the air, the human body became a surrealist monster.

For Franklin, and the tens of thousands of fellow sufferers, the fugues had begun in the same way, with the briefest moments of inattention. An overlong pause in the middle of a sentence, some mysteriously burnt-out scrambled egg, the air force sergeant who looked after the Mercedes annoyed by his off-hand rudeness, together led on to longer stretches of missed time. Subjectively, the moment-to-moment flow of consciousness seemed to be uninterrupted. But time drained away, leaking slowly from his life. Only the previous day he had been standing at the window, looking at the line of cars in the late afternoon sunlight, and the next moment there was dusk outside and a deserted parking lot.

All victims told the same story – there were forgotten appointments, inexplicable car crashes, untended infants rescued by police and neighbours. The victims would 'wake' at midnight in empty office blocks, find themselves in stagnant baths, be arrested for jay-walking, forget to feed themselves. Within six months they would be conscious for only half the day, afraid to drive or go out into the streets, desperately filling every room with clocks and timepieces. A week would flash past in a jumble of sunsets and dawns. By the end of the first year they would be alert for only a few minutes each day, no longer able to feed or care for themselves, and soon after would enter one of the dozens of state hospitals and sanatoria.

After his arrival at the clinic Franklin's first patient was a badly burned fighter pilot who had taxied his jet through the doors of a hangar. The second was one of the last of the astronauts, a former naval captain named Trippett. The pilot was soon beyond reach in a perpetual dusk, but Trippett had hung on, lucid for a few minutes each day. Franklin had learned a great deal from Trippett, the last man to have walked on the moon and the last to hold out against the fugues – all the early astronauts had long since retreated into a timeless world. The hundreds of fragmentary conversations, and the mysterious guilt that Trippett shared with his colleagues, like them weeping in his dreams, convinced Franklin that the sources of the malaise were to be found in the space programme itself.

By leaving his planet and setting off into outer space man had committed an evolutionary crime, a breach of the rules governing his tenancy of the universe, and of the laws of time and space. Perhaps the right to travel through space belonged to another order of beings, but his crime

was being punished just as surely as would be any attempt to ignore the laws of gravity. Certainly the unhappy lives of the astronauts bore all the signs of a deepening sense of guilt. The relapse into alcoholism, silence and pseudo-mysticism, and the mental breakdowns, suggested profound anxieties about the moral and biological rightness of space exploration.

Sadly, not only the astronauts were affected. Each space-launch left its trace in the minds of those watching the expeditions. Each flight to the moon and each journey around the sun was a trauma that warped their perception of time and space. The brute-force ejection of themselves from their planet had been an act of evolutionary piracy, for which they were now being expelled from the world of time.

Preoccupied with his memories of the astronauts, Franklin was the last to leave the clinic. He had expected his usual afternoon fugue, and sat at his desk in the silent laboratory, finger on his stopwatch. But the fugue had not occurred, perhaps deflected by his buoyant mood after the drive with Trippett. As he walked across the car park he looked out over the deserted air base. Two hundred yards from the control tower, a young woman with an apron around her waist stood on the concrete runway, lost in her fugue. Half a mile away, two more women stood in the centre of the huge cargo runway. All of them came from the nearby town. At twilight these women of the runways left their homes and trailers and strayed across the air base, staring into the dusk like the wives of forgotten astronauts waiting for their husbands to return from the tideways of space.

The sight of these women always touched Franklin in a disturbing way, and he had to force himself to start the car. As he drove towards Las Vegas the desert seemed almost lunar in the evening light. No one came to Nevada now, and most of the local population had long since left, fearing the uneasy perspectives of the desert. When he reached home the dusk filtered through a cerise haze that lay over the old casinos and hotels, a ghostly memory of the electric night.

Franklin liked the abandoned gambling resort. The other physicians lived within a short drive of the clinic, but Franklin had chosen one of the half-empty motels in the northern suburbs of the city. In the evenings, after visiting his few patients in their retirement homes, he would often drive down the silent Strip, below the sunset façades of the vast hotels, and wander for hours through the shadows among the drained swimming pools. This city of spent dreams, which had once boasted that it contained no clocks, now seemed itself to be in fugue.

As he parked in the forecourt of the motel he noted that Marion's car was missing. The third-floor apartment was empty. The television set was drawn up by the bed, playing silently to a clutch of medical textbooks Marion had taken from his shelves and an overflowing ashtray like a vent of Vesuvius. Franklin hung the unracked dresses in the wardrobe. As he counted the fresh cigarette burns in the carpet he reflected on the remarkable disarray that Marion could achieve in a few hours, here

as in everything else. Were her fugues real or simulated? Sometimes he suspected that she half-consciously mimicked the time-slips, in an effort to enter that one realm where Franklin was free of her, safe from all her frustration at having come back to him.

Franklin went on to the balcony and glanced down at the empty swimming pool. Often Marion sunbathed nude on the floor at the deep end, and perhaps had been trapped there by her fugue. He listened to the drone of a light aircraft circling the distant hotels, and learned from the retired geologist in the next apartment that Marion had driven away only minutes before his arrival.

As he set off in the car he realized that his afternoon fugue had still not occurred. Had Marion seen his headlamps approaching across the desert, and then decided on impulse to disappear into the unlit evening of the Strip hotels? She had known Slade at Houston three years earlier, when he tried to persuade her to intercede with Franklin. Now he seemed to be courting her from the sky, for reasons that Marion probably failed to realize. Even their original affair had been part of his elaborate stalking of Franklin.

The aircraft had vanished, disappearing across the desert. Franklin drove along the Strip, turning in and out of the hotel forecourts. In an empty car park he saw one of the ghosts of the twilight, a middle-aged man in a shabby tuxedo, some retired croupier or cardiologist returning to these dreaming hulks. Caught in mid-thought, he stared sightlessly at a dead neon sign. Not far away, a strong-hipped young woman stood among the dusty pool-furniture, her statuesque figure transformed by the fugue into that of a Delvaux muse.

Franklin stopped to help them, if possible rouse them before they froze in the cold desert night. But as he stepped from his car he saw that the headlamps were reflected in the stationary propeller blade of a small aircraft parked on the Strip.

Slade leaned from the cockpit of his microlight, his white skin an unhealthy ivory in the electric beams. He was still naked, gesturing in an intimate way at a handsome woman in a streetwalker's fur who was playfully inspecting his cockpit. He beckoned her towards the narrow seat, like some cruising driver of old trying to entice a passer-by.

Admiring Slade for his nerve in using the sky to accost his wife, Franklin broke into a run. Slade had taken Marion's waist and was trying to pull her into the cockpit.

'Leave her, Slade!' Fifty feet from them, Franklin stumbled over a discarded tyre. He stopped to catch his breath as – an engine of noise hurtled towards him out of the darkness, the same metallic blare he had heard in the desert that morning. Slade's aircraft raced along the Strip, wheels bouncing on the road, its propeller lit by the car's headlamps. As Franklin fell to his knees the plane banked to avoid him, climbed steeply and soared away into the sky.

Hunting for Slade, the excited air surged around Franklin. He stood

up, hands raised to shield his face from the stinging dust. The darkness was filled with rotating blades. Silver lassoes spiralled out of the night, images of the propeller that launched themselves one after another from the wake of the vanished aircraft.

Still stunned by the violent attack of the machine, Franklin listened to its last drone across the desert. He watched the retinal display that had transformed the shadowy streets. Silver coils spun away over his head and disappeared among the hotels, a glistening flight path that he could almost touch with his hands. Steadying himself against the hard pavement under his feet, he turned to follow his wife as she fled from him through the drained swimming pools and deserted car parks of the newly lit city.

'Poor man – couldn't you see him? He flew straight at you. Robert . . . ?'

'Of course I saw him. I don't think I'd be here otherwise.'

'But you stood there, totally mesmerized. I know he's always fascinated you, but that was carrying it too far. If that propeller had . . .'

'It was a small experiment,' Franklin said. 'I wanted to see what he was trying to do.'

'He was trying to kill you!'

Franklin sat on the end of the bed, staring at the cigarette burns in the carpet. They had reached the apartment fifteen minutes earlier, but he was still trying to calm himself. He thought of the rotating blade that had devoured the darkness. Delayed all afternoon, his fugue had begun as he tripped over the tyre, and had lasted almost an hour. For her own reasons Marion was pretending that the fugue had not occurred, but when he woke his skin was frozen. What had she and Slade been doing during the lost time? Too easily, Franklin imagined them together in Marion's car, or even in the cockpit of the aircraft, watched by the sightless husband. That would please Slade, put him in just the mood to scare the wits out of Franklin as he took off.

Through the open door Franklin stared at his wife's naked body in the white cube of the bathroom. A wet cigarette smouldered in the soap dish. There were clusters of small bruises on her thighs and hips, marks of some stylized grapple. One day soon, when the time drained out of her, the contours of her breasts and thighs would migrate to the polished walls, calm as the dunes and valleys of the perimeter photographs.

Sitting down at the dressing table, Marion peered over her powdered shoulder with some concern. 'Are you going to be all right? I'm finding it difficult enough to cope with myself. That wasn't an attack . . . ?'

'Of course not.' For months now they had kept up the pretence that neither of them was affected by the fugues. Marion needed the illusion, more in Franklin's case than in her own. 'But I may not always be immune.'

'Robert, if anyone's immune, you are. Think of yourself, what you've always wanted – alone in the world, just you and these empty hotels. But be careful of Slade.'

'I am.' Casually, Franklin added: 'I want you to see more of him. Arrange a meeting.'

'What?' Marion looked round at her husband again, her left contact lens trapped under her eyelid. 'He was naked, you know.'

'So I saw. That's part of his code. Slade's trying to tell me something. He needs me, in a special way.'

'Needs you? He doesn't need you, believe me. But for you he would have gone to the moon. You took that away from him, Robert.'

'And I can give it back to him.'

'How? Are the two of you going to start your own space programme?'

'In a sense we already have. But we really need you to help us.'

Franklin waited for her to reply, but Marion sat raptly in front of the mirror, lens case in one hand, fingers retracting her upper and lower eyelids around the trapped lens. Fused with her own reflection in the finger-stained glass, she seemed to be shooting the sun with a miniature sextant, finding her bearings in this city of empty mirrors. He remembered their last month together after the end at Cape Kennedy, the long drive down the dead Florida coast. The space programme had expressed all its failure in that terminal moraine of deserted hotels and apartment houses, a cryptic architecture like the forgotten codes of a discarded geometric language. He remembered Marion's blood flowing into the hand-basin from her slashed palms, and the constant arguments that warped themselves out of the air.

Yet curiously those had been happy days, filled with the quickening excitements of her illness. He had dreamed of her promiscuity, the deranged favours granted to waitresses and bellboys. He came back alone from Miami, resting beside the swimming pools of the empty hotels, remembering the intoxications of abandoned parking lots. In a sense that drive had been his first conscious experiment with time and space, placing that body and its unhappy mind in a sequence of bathrooms and pools, watching her with her lovers in the diagrammed car parks, emotions hung on these abstract webs of space.

Affectionately, Franklin placed his hands on Marion's shoulders, feeling the familiar clammy skin of the fugue. He lowered her hands to her lap, and then removed the contact lens from her eyeball, careful not to cut the cornea. Franklin smiled down at her blanched face, counting the small scars and blemishes that had appeared around her mouth. Like all women, Marion never really feared the fugues, accepting the popular myth that during these periods of lapsed time the body refused to age.

Sitting beside her on the stool, Franklin embraced her gently. He held her breasts in his palms, for a moment shoring up their slipping curvatures. For all his fondness for Marion, he would have to use her in his duel with Slade. The planes of her thighs and shoulders were segments of a secret runway along which he would one day fly to safety.

July 5

Not one of my best days. Five long fugues, each lasting over an hour. The first started at 9 am as I was walking around the pool towards the car. Suddenly I found myself standing by the deep end in much steeper sunlight, the old geologist poking me in a concerned way. Marion had told him not to disturb me, I was deep in thought! I must remember to wear a hat in future, the sunlight brought out a viral rash on my lips. An excuse for Marion not to kiss me, without realizing it she's eager to get away from here, can't pretend for much longer that the fugues don't exist. Does she guess that in some way I plan to exploit that keening sex of hers?

These long fugues are strange, for the first time since the airplane attack I have a vague memory of the dead time. The geometry of that drained pool acted like a mirror, the sky seemed to be full of suns. Perhaps Marion knew that she was doing when she sunbathed there. I ought to climb down that rusty chromium ladder into a new kind of time? *Lost time total*: 6 hours 50 min.

July 11

A dangerous fugue today, and what may have been another attempt on my life by Slade. I nearly killed myself driving to the clinic, must think hard about going there again. The first fugue came at 8.15 a.m., synchronized with Marion's – our sole connubial activity now. I must have spent an hour opening the bathroom door, staring at her as she stood motionless in the shower stall. Curious after-images, sections of her anatomy seemed to be splayed across the walls and ceiling, even over the car park outside. For the first time I felt that it might be possible to stay awake during the fugues. A weird world, spatial change perceived independently of time.

Fired by all this, I set off for the clinic, eager to try something out on the perimeter camera. But only a mile down the highway I must have gone straight off the road, found myself in the parking lot of some abandoned hypermarket, surrounded by a crowd of staring faces. In fact, they were department store mannequins. Suddenly there was a volley of gunshots, fibreglass arms and heads were flying everywhere. Slade at his games again, this time with a pump-gun on the roof of the hypermarket. He must have seen me stranded there and placed the mannequins around me. The timeless people, the only mementoes of *homo sapiens* when we've all gone, waiting here with their idiotic smiles for the first stellar visitor.

How does Slade repress the fugues? Perhaps violence, like pornography, is some kind of evolutionary standby system, a last-resort device for throwing a wild joker into the game? A widespread taste for pornography means that nature is alerting us to some threat of extinction. I keep thinking about Ursula, incidentally . . . *Total time lost*: 8 hours 17 min.

July 15

Must get out of this motel more often. A curious by-product of the fugues is that I'm losing all sense of urgency. Sat here for the last three days, calmly watching time run through my fingers. Almost convinces me that the fugues are a good thing, a sign that some great biological step forward is about to take place, set off by the space flights. Alternatively, my mind is simply numbing itself through sheer fear . . .

This morning I forced myself into the sunlight. I drove slowly around Las Vegas, looking out for Marion and thinking about the links between gambling and time. One could devise a random world, where the length of each time interval depended on chance. Perhaps the high-rollers who came to Vegas were nearer the truth than they realized. 'Clock time' is a neurophysiological construct, a measuring rod confined to *homo sapiens*. The old labrador owned by the geologist next door obviously has a different sense of time, likewise the cicadas beside the pool. Even the materials of my body and the lower levels of my brain have a very different sense of time from my cerebrum – that uninvited guest within my skull.

Simultaneity? It's possible to imagine that everything is happening at once, all the events 'past' and 'future' which constitute the universe are taking place together. Perhaps our sense of time is a primitive mental structure that we inherited from our less intelligent forebears. For prehistoric man the invention of time (a brilliant conceptual leap) was a way of classifying and storing the huge flood of events which his dawning mind had opened for him. Like a dog burying a large bone, the invention of time allowed him to postpone the recognition of an event-system too large for him to grasp at one bite.

If time *is* a primitive mental structure we have inherited, then we ought to welcome its atrophy, embrace the fugues – *Total time lost*: 9 hours 15 min.

July 25

Everything is slowing down, I have to force myself to remember to eat and shower. It's all rather pleasant, no fear even though I'm left with only six or seven hours of conscious time each day. Marion comes and goes, we literally have no time to talk to each other. A day passes as quickly as an afternoon. At lunch I was looking at some album photographs of my mother and father, and a formal wedding portrait of Marion and myself, and suddenly it was evening. I feel a strange nostalgia for my childhood friends, as if I'm about to meet them for the first time, an awakening premonition of the past. I can see the past coming alive in the dust on the balcony, in the dried leaves at the bottom of the pool, part of an immense granary of past time whose doors we can open with the right key. Nothing is older than the very new – a newborn baby with its head emerging from its mother

has the smooth, time-worn features of Pharaoh. The whole process of life is the discovery of the immanent past contained in the present.

At the same time, I feel a growing nostalgia for the future, a memory of the future I have already experienced but somehow forgotten. In our lives we try to repeat those significant events which have already taken place in the future. As we grow older we feel an increasing nostalgia for our own deaths, through which we have already passed. Equally, we have a growing premonition of our births, which are about to take place. At any moment we may be born for the first time. *Total time lost*: 10 hours 5 min.

July 29

Slade has been here. I suspect that he's been entering the apartment while I fugue. I had an uncanny memory of someone in the bedroom this morning, when I came out of the 11 a.m. fugue there was a curious after-image, almost a pentecostal presence, a vaguely bio-morphic blur that hung in the air like a photograph taken with the perimeter camera. My pistol had been removed from the dressing-table drawer and placed on my pillow. There's a small diagram of white paint on the back of my left hand. Some kind of cryptic pattern, a geometric key.

Has Slade been reading my diary? This afternoon someone painted the same pattern across the canted floor of the swimming pool and over the gravel in the car park. Presumably all part of Slade's serious games with time and space. He's trying to rally me, force me out of the apartment, but the fugues leave me with no more than two hours at a stretch of conscious time. I'm not the only one affected. Las Vegas is almost deserted, everyone has retreated indoors. The old geologist and his wife sit all day in their bedroom, each in a straight-backed chair on either side of the bed. I gave them a vitamin shot, but they're so emaciated they won't last much longer. No reply from the police or ambulance services. Marion is away again, hunting the empty hotels of the Strip for any sign of Slade. No doubt she thinks that he alone can save her. *Total time lost*: 12 hours 35 min.

August 12

Rachel Vaisey called today, concerned about me and disappointed not to find Marion here. The clinic has closed, and she's about to go east. A strange pantomime, we talked stiffly for ten minutes. She was clearly baffled by my calm appearance, despite my beard and coffee-stained trousers, and kept staring at the white pattern on my hand and at the similar shapes on the bedroom ceiling, the car park outside and even a section of a small apartment house half a mile away. I'm now at the focus of a huge geometric puzzle radiating from my left hand through the open window and out across Las Vegas and the desert.

I was relieved when she had gone. Ordinary time – so-called 'real time' – now seems totally unreal. With her discrete existence, her

prissy point-to-point consciousness, Rachel reminded me of a figure in an animated tableau of Time Man in an anthropological museum of the future. All the same, it's difficult to be too optimistic. I wish Marion were here. *Total time lost*: 15 hours 7 min.

August 21

Down now to a few stretches of consciousness that last barely an hour at the most. Time seems continuous, but the days go by in a blur of dawns and sunsets. Almost continuously eating, or I'll die of starvation. I only hope that Marion can look after herself, she doesn't seem to have been here for weeks –

– the pen snapped in Franklin's hand. As he woke, he found himself slumped across his diary. Torn pages lay on the carpet around his feet. During the two-hour fugue a violent struggle had taken place, his books were scattered around an overturned lamp, there were heel marks in the cigarette ash on the floor. Franklin touched his bruised shoulders. Someone had seized him as he sat there in his fugue, trying to shake him into life, and had torn the watch from his wrist.

A familiar noise sounded from the sky. The clacking engine of a light aircraft crossed the nearby roof-tops. Franklin stood up, shielding his eyes from the vivid air on the balcony. He watched the aircraft circle the surrounding streets and then speed towards him. A molten light dripped from the propeller, spraying the motel with liquid platinum, a retinal tincture that briefly turned the street dust to silver.

The plane flew past, heading north from Las Vegas, and he saw that Slade had recruited a passenger. A blonde woman in a ragged fur sat behind the naked pilot, hands clasped around his waist. Like a startled dreamer, she stared down at Franklin.

As the microlight soared away, Franklin went into the bathroom. Rallying himself, he gazed at the sallow, bearded figure in the mirror, a ghost of himself. Already sections of his mind were migrating towards the peaceful geometry of the bathroom walls. But at least Marion was still alive. Had she tried to intercede as Slade attacked him? There was a faint image on the air of a wounded woman . . .

Las Vegas was deserted. Here and there, as he set off in the car, he saw a grey face at a window, or a blanket draped across two pairs of knees on a balcony. All the clocks had stopped, and without his watch he could no longer tell how long the fugues had lasted, or when the next was about to begin.

Driving at a cautious ten miles an hour, Franklin slowed to a halt every five miles, then waited until he found himself sitting in the car with a cold engine. The temperature dial became his clock. It was almost noon when he reached the air base. The clinic was silent, its car park empty. Weeds grew through the fading marker lines, an empty report sheet left behind by those unhappy psychiatrists and their now vanished patients.

Franklin let himself into the building and walked through the deserted wards and laboratories. His colleagues' equipment had been shipped away, but when he unlocked the doors to his own laboratory he found the packing cases where he had left them.

In front of the perimeter camera a rubber mattress lay on the turntable. Next to it an ashtray overflowed with cigarette ends that had burned the wooden planks.

So Slade had turned his talents to a special kind of photography – a pornography in the round. Pinned to the walls behind the camera was a gallery of huge prints. These strange landscapes resembled aerial photographs of a desert convulsed by a series of titanic earthquakes, as if one geological era were giving birth to another. Elongated clefts and gulleys stretched across the prints, their contours so like those that had lingered in the apartment after Marion's showers.

But a second geometry overlayed the first, a scarred and aggressive musculature he had seen borne on the wind. The aircraft was parked outside the window, its cockpit and passenger seat empty in the sunlight. A naked man sat behind the desk in Franklin's office, goggles around his forehead. Looking at him, Franklin realized why Slade had always appeared naked.

'Come in, doctor. God knows it's taken you long enough to get here.' He weighed Franklin's wristwatch in his hand, clearly disappointed by the shabby figure in front of him. He had removed the centre drawer from the desk, and was playing with Franklin's shrine. To the original objects Slade had added a small chromium pistol. Deciding against the wristwatch, he tossed it into the waste basket.

'I don't think that's really part of you any longer. You're a man without time. I've moved into your office, Franklin. Think of it as my mission control centre.'

'Slade . . .' Franklin felt a sudden queasiness, a warning of the onset of the next fugue. The air seemed to warp itself around him. Holding the door-frame, he restrained himself from rushing to the waste basket. 'Marion's here with you. I need to see her.'

'See her, then . . .' Slade pointed to the perimeter photographs. 'I'm sure you recognize her, Franklin. You've been using her for the last ten years. That's why you joined NASA. You've been pilfering from your wife and the agency in the same way, stealing the parts for your space machine. I've even helped you myself.'

'Helped . . . ? Marion told me that –'

'Franklin!' Slade stood up angrily, knocking the chromium pistol on to the floor. His hands worked clumsily at his scarred ribs, as if he were forcing himself to breathe. Watching him, Franklin could almost believe that Slade had held back the fugues by a sheer effort of will, by a sustained anger against the very dimensions of time and space.

'This time, doctor, you can't ground me. But for you I would have walked on the moon!'

Franklin was watching the pistol at his feet, uncertain how to pacify this manic figure. 'Slade, but for me you'd be with the others. If you'd flown with the space-crews you'd be like Trippett.'

'I am like Trippett.' Calm again, Slade stepped to the window and stared at the empty runways. 'I'm taking the old boy, Franklin. He's coming with me to the sun. It's a pity you're not coming. But don't worry, you'll find a way out of the fugues. In fact, I'm relying on it.'

He stepped around the desk and picked the pistol from the floor. As Franklin swayed, he touched the physician's cooling forehead with the weapon. 'I'm going to kill you, Franklin. Not now, but right at the end, as we go out into that last fugue. Trippett and I will be flying to the sun, and you . . . you'll die forever.'

There were fifteen minutes, at the most, before the next fugue. Slade had vanished, taking the aircraft into the sky. Franklin gazed round the silent laboratory, listening to the empty air. He retrieved his wristwatch from the waste basket and left. As he reached the parking lot, searching for his car among the maze of diagonal lines, the desert landscape around the air base resembled the perimeter photographs of Marion and Slade together. The hills wavered and shimmered, excited echoes of that single sexual act, mimicking every caress.

Already the moisture in his body was being leached away by the sun. His skin prickled with an attack of hives. He left the clinic and drove through the town, slowing to avoid the filling-station proprietor, his wife and child who stood in the centre of the road. They stared sightlessly into the haze as if waiting for the last car in the world.

He set off towards Las Vegas, trying not to look at the surrounding hills. Ravines fondled each other, rock-towers undulated as if the earth itself were on its marriage bed. Irritated by his own sweat and the oozing hills, Franklin urged on the accelerator, pushing the car's speed to forty miles an hour. The whole mineral world seemed intent on taking its revenge on him. Light stabbed at his retinas from the exposed quartz veins, from the rusting bowls of the radar dishes on the hill crests. Franklin fixed his eyes on the speeding marker line between the car's wheels, dreaming of Las Vegas, that dusty Samarkand.

Then time side-stepped in front of him again.

He woke to find himself lying under the torn ceiling liner of the overturned car, his legs stretched through the broken windshield. Burst from their locks, the open doors hung above him in a haze of idle dust. Franklin pushed aside the loose seats that had fallen across him and climbed from the car. A faint steam rose from the fractured radiator, and the last of the coolant trickled into the culvert of the old irrigation system into which the car had slewed. The blue liquid formed a small pool, then, as he watched it, sank into the sand.

A single kite circled the sky over his head, but the landscape was empty.

Half a mile away was the tarry strip of the highway. As he fugued the car had veered off the road, then sped in a wide circle across the scrub, upending itself as it jumped the first of the irrigation ditches. Franklin brushed the sand from his face and beard. He had been unconscious for almost two hours, part-concussion and part-fugue, and the harsh, noon light had driven all shadows from the sandy soil. The northern suburbs of Las Vegas were ten miles away, too far for him to walk, but the white domes of Soleri II rose from the foothills to the west of the highway, little more than two miles across the desert. He could see the metallic flicker of the solar mirrors as one of the canted dishes caught the sun.

Still jarred by the crash, Franklin turned his back to the road and set off along the causeway between the irrigation ditches. After only a hundred yards he sank to his knees. The sand liquefied at his feet, sucking at his shoes as if eager to strip the clothes from his back and expose him to the sun.

Playing its private game with Franklin, the sun changed places in the sky. The fugues were coming at fifteen-minute intervals. He found himself leaning against a rusting pump-head. Huge pipes emerged thirstlessly from the forgotten ground. His shadow hid behind him, scuttling under his heels. Franklin waved away the circling kite. All too easily he could imagine the bird perching on his shoulder as he fugued, and lunching off his eyes. He was still more than a mile from the solar mirrors, but their sharp light cut at his retinas. If he could reach the tower, climb a few of its steps and signal with a fragment of broken glass, someone might . . .

. . . the sun was trying to trick him again. More confident now, his shadow had emerged from beneath his heels and slid silkily along the stony ground, unafraid of this tottering scarecrow who made an ordeal of each step. Franklin sat down in the dust. Lying on his side, he felt the blisters on his eyelids, lymph-filled sacs that had almost closed his orbits. Any more fugues and he would die here, blood, life and time would run out of him at the same moment.

He stood up and steadied himself against the air. The hills undulated around him, the copulating bodies of all the women he had known, together conceiving this mineral world for him to die within.

Three hundred yards away, between himself and the solar mirrors, a single palm tree dipped its green parasol. Franklin stepped gingerly through the strange light, nervous of this mirage. As he moved forward a second palm appeared, then a third and fourth. There was a glimmer of blue water, the calm surface of an oasis pool.

His body had given up, the heavy arms and legs that emerged from his trunk had slipped into the next fugue. But his mind had scrambled free inside his skull. Franklin knew that even if this oasis were a mirage, it was a mirage that he could see, and that for the first time he was conscious during a fugue. Like the driver of a slow-witted automaton, he propelled himself across the sandy ground, a half-roused sleepwalker clinging to the blue pool before his eyes. More trees had appeared,

groves of palms lowered their fronds to the glassy surface of a serpentine lake.

Franklin hobbled forward, ignoring the two kites in the sky above his head. The air was engorged with light, a flood of photons crowded around him. A third kite appeared, joined almost at once by half a dozen more.

But Franklin was looking at the green valley spread out in front of him, at the forest of palms that shaded an archipelago of lakes and pools, together fed by cool streams that ran down from the surrounding hills. Everything seemed calm and yet vivid, the young earth seen for the first time, where all Franklin's ills would be soothed and assuaged in its sweet waters. Within this fertile valley everything multiplied itself without effort. From his outstretched arms fell a dozen shadows, each cast by one of the twelve suns above his head.

Towards the end, while he made his last attempt to reach the lake, he saw a young woman walking towards him. She moved through the palm trees with concerned eyes, hands clasped at her waist, as if searching for a child or elderly parent who had strayed into the wilderness. As Franklin waved to her she was joined by her twin, another grave-faced young woman who walked with the same cautious step. Behind them came other sisters, moving through the palms like schoolgirls from their class, concubines from a pavilion cooled by the lake. Kneeling before them, Franklin waited for the women to find him, to take him away from the desert to the meadows of the valley.

Time, in a brief act of kindness, flowed back into Franklin. He lay in a domed room, behind a verandah shaded by a glass awning. Through the railings he could see the towers and apartment terraces of Soleri II, its concrete architecture a reassuring shoulder against the light. An old man sat on a terrace across the square. Although deeply asleep, he remained inwardly alert and gestured with his hands in a rhythmic way, happily conducting an orchestra of stones and creosote bushes.

Franklin was glad to see the old astronaut. All day Trippett sat in his chair, conducting the desert through its repertory of invisible music. Now and then he sipped a little water that Ursula brought him, and then returned to his colloquy with the sun and the dust.

The three of them lived alone in Soleri II, in this empty city of a future without time. Only Franklin's wristwatch and its restless second hand linked them to the past world.

'Doctor Franklin, why don't you throw it away?' Ursula asked him, as she fed Franklin the soup she prepared each morning on the solar fireplace in the piazza. 'You don't need it any more. There's no time to tell.'

'Ursula, I know. It's some kind of link, I suppose, a telephone line left open to a world we're leaving behind. Just in case . . .'

Ursula raised his head and dusted the sand from his pillow. With only an hour left to her each day, housework played little part in her life. Yet her broad face and handsome body expressed all the myths of the maternal

child. She had seen Franklin wandering across the desert as she sat on her verandah during an early afternoon fugue.

'I'm sorry I couldn't find you, doctor. There were hundreds of you, the desert was covered with dying men, like some kind of lost army. I didn't know which one to pick.'

'I'm glad you came, Ursula. I saw you as a crowd of dreamy schoolgirls. There's so much to learn . . .'

'You've made a start, doctor. I knew it months ago when we drove Dad out here. There's enough time.'

They both laughed at this, as the old man across the piazza conducted the orchestral sands. Enough time, when time was what they were most eager to escape. Franklin held the young woman's wrist and listened to her calm pulse, impatient for the next fugue to begin. He looked out over the arid valley below, at the cloud-filled mirrors of the solar farm and the rusting tower with its cracked collector dish. Where were those groves of palms and magic lakes, the sweet streams and pastures from which the grave and beautiful young women had emerged to carry him away to safety? During the fugues that followed his recovery they had begun to return, but not as vividly as he had seen them from the desert floor in the hours after his crash. Each fugue, though, gave him a glimpse of that real world, streams flowed to fill the lakes again.

Ursula and her father, of course, could see the valley bloom, a dense and vivid forest as rich as the Amazon's.

'You see the trees, Ursula, the same ones your father saw?'

'All of them, and millions of flowers, too. Nevada's a wonderful garden now. Our eyes are filling the whole state with blossom. One flower makes the desert bloom.'

'And one tree becomes a forest, one drop of water a whole lake. Time took that away from us, Ursula, though for a brief while the first men and women probably saw the world as a paradise. When did you learn to see?'

'When I brought Dad out here, after they shut the clinic. But it started during our drive. Later we went back to the mirrors. They helped me open my eyes. Dad's already were open.'

'The solar mirrors – I should have gone back myself.'

'Slade waited for you, doctor. He waited for months. He's almost out of time now – I think he only has enough time for one more flight.' Ursula dusted the sand from the sheet. For all the Amazon blaze during their fugues, clouds of dust blew into the apartment, a gritty reminder of a different world. She listened to the silent wind. 'Never mind, doctor, there are so many doors. For us it was the mirrors, for you it was that strange camera and your wife's body in sex.'

She fell silent, staring at the verandah with eyes from which time had suddenly drained. Her hand was open, letting the sand run away, fingers outstretched like a child's to catch the brilliant air. Smiling at everything around her, she tried to talk to Franklin, but the sounds came out like a baby's burble.

Franklin held her cold hands, happy to be with her during the fugue. He liked to listen to her murmuring talk. So-called articulate speech was an artefact of time. But the babbling infant, and this young woman, spoke with the lucidity of the timeless, that same lucidity that others tried to achieve in delirium and brain-damage. The babbling new-born were telling their mothers of that realm of wonder from which they had just been expelled. He urged Ursula on, eager to understand her. Soon they would go into the light together, into that last fugue which would free them from the world of appearances.

He waited for the hands to multiply on his watch-dial, the sure sign of the next fugue. In the real world beyond the clock, serial time gave way to simultaneity. Like a camera with its shutter left open indefinitely, the eye perceived a moving object as a series of separate images. Ursula's walking figure as she searched for Franklin had left a hundred replicas of herself behind her, seeded the air with a host of identical twins. Seen from the speeding car, the few frayed palm trees along the road had multiplied themselves across the screen of Trippett's mind, the same forest of palms that Franklin had perceived as he moved across the desert. The lakes had been the multiplied images of the water in that tepid motel pool, and the blue streams were the engine coolant running from the radiator of his overturned car.

During the following days, when he left his bed and began to move around the apartment, Franklin happily embraced the fugues. Each day he shed another two or three minutes. Within only a few weeks, time would cease to exist. Now, however, he was awake during the fugues, able to explore this empty suburb of the radiant city. He had been freed by the ambiguous dream that had sustained him for so long, the vision of his wife with Slade, then copulating with the surrounding hills, in this ultimate infidelity with the mineral kingdom and with time and space themselves.

In the mornings he watched Ursula bathe in the piazza below his verandah. As she strolled around the fountain, drying herself under a dozen suns, Soleri II seemed filled with beautiful, naked women bathing themselves in a city of waterfalls, a seraglio beyond all the fantasies of Franklin's childhood.

At noon, during a few last minutes of time, Franklin stared at himself in the wardrobe mirror. He felt embarrassed by the continued presence of his body, by the sticklike arms and legs, a collection of bones discarded at the foot of the clock. As the fugue began he raised his arms and filled the room with replicas of himself, a procession of winged men each dressed in his coronation armour. Free from time, the light had become richer, gilding his skin with layer upon layer of golden leaf. Confident now, he knew that death was merely a failure of time, and that if he died this would be in a small and unimportant way. Long before they died, he and Ursula would become the people of the sun.

* * *

It was the last day of past time, and the first of the day of forever.

Franklin woke in the white room to feel Ursula slapping his shoulders. The exhausted girl lay across his chest, sobbing into her fists. She held his wristwatch in her hand, and pressed it against his forehead.

'. . . wake, doctor. Come back just once . . .'

'Ursula, you're cutting –'

'Doctor!' Relieved to see him awake, she rubbed her tears into his forehead. 'It's Dad, doctor.'

'The old man? What is it? Has he died?'

'No, he won't die.' She shook her head, and then pointed to the empty terrace across the piazza. 'Slade's been here. He's taken Dad!'

She swayed against the mirror as Franklin dressed. He searched unsteadily for a hat to shield himself from the sun, listening to the rackety engine of Slade's microlight. It was parked on the service road near the solar farm, and the reflected light from its propeller filled the air with knives. Since his arrival at Soleri he had seen nothing of Slade, and hoped that he had flown away, taking Marion with him. Now the noise and violence of the engine were tearing apart the new world he had constructed so carefully. Within only a few more hours he and Ursula would escape from time for ever.

Franklin leaned against the rim of the washbasin, no longer recognizing the monk-like figure who stared at him from the shaving mirror. Already he felt exhausted by the effort of coping with this small segment of conscious time, an adult forced to play a child's frantic game. During the past three weeks time had been running out at an ever faster rate. All that was left was a single brief period of a few minutes each day, useful only for the task of feeding himself and the girl. Ursula had lost interest in cooking for them, and devoted herself to drifting through the arcades and sundecks of the city, deep in her fugues.

Aware that they would both perish unless he mastered the fugues, Franklin steered himself into the kitchen. In the warm afternoons the steam from the soup tureen soon turned the solar city into an island of clouds. Gradually, though, he was teaching Ursula to eat, to talk and respond to him even during the fugues. There was a new language to learn, sentences whose nouns and verbs were separated by days, syllables whose vowels were marked by the phases of the sun and moon. This was a language outside time, whose grammar was shaped by the contours of Ursula's breasts in his hands, by the geometry of the apartment. The angle between two walls became an Homeric myth. He and Ursula lisped at each other, lovers talking between the transits of the moon, in the language of birds, wolves and whales. From the start, their sex together had taken away all Franklin's fears. Ursula's ample figure at last proved itself in the fugues. Nature had prepared her for a world without time, and he lay between her breasts like Trippett sleeping in his meadows.

Now he was back in a realm of harsh light and rigid perspectives, wristwatch in hand, its mark on his forehead.

'Ursula, try not to follow me.' At the city gates he steadied her against the portico, trying to rub a few more seconds of time into her cooling hands. If they both went out into the desert, they would soon perish in the heat of that angry and lonely sun. Like all things, the sun needed its companions, needed time leached away from it . . .

As Franklin set off across the desert the microlight's engine began to race at full bore, choked itself and stuttered to a stop. Slade stepped from the cockpit, uninterested in Franklin's approach. He was still naked, except for his goggles, and his white skin was covered with weals and sun-sores, as if time itself were an infective plague from which he now intended to escape. He swung the propeller, shouting at the flooded engine. Strapped into the passenger seat of the aircraft was a grey-haired old man, a scarecrow stuffed inside an oversize flying jacket. Clearly missing the vivid flash of the propeller, Trippett moved his hands up and down, a juggler palming pieces of light in the air.

'Slade! Leave the old man!'

Franklin ran forward into the sun. His next fugue would begin in a few minutes, leaving him exposed to the dream-like violence of Slade's propeller. He fell to his knees against the nearest of the mirrors as the engine clattered into life.

Satisfied, Slade stepped back from the propeller, smiling at the old astronaut. Trippett swayed in his seat, eager for the flight to begin. Slade patted his head, and then surveyed the surrounding landscape. His gaunt face seemed calm for the first time, as if he now accepted the logic of the air and the light, the vibrating propeller and the happy old man in his passenger seat. Watching him, Franklin knew that Slade was delaying his flight until the last moment, so that he would take off into his own fugue. As they soared towards the sun, he and the old astronaut would make their way into space again, on their forever journey to the stars.

'Slade, we want the old man here! You don't need him now!'

Slade frowned at Franklin's shout, this hoarse voice from the empty mirrors. Turning from the cockpit, he brushed his sunburnt shoulder against the starboard wing. He winced, and dropped the chromium pistol on to the sand.

Before he could retrieve it, Franklin stood up and ran through the lines of mirrors. High above, he could see the reflection of himself in the collector dish, a stumbling cripple who had pirated the sky. Even Trippett had noticed him, and rollicked in his seat, urging on this lunatic aerialist. He reached the last of the mirrors, straddled the metal plate and walked towards Slade, brushing the dust from his trousers.

'Doctor, you're too late.' Slade shook his head, impatient with Franklin's derelict appearance. 'A whole life too late. We're taking off now.'

'Leave Trippett . . .' Franklin tried to speak, but the words slurred on his tongue. 'I'll take his place . . .'

'I don't think so, doctor. Besides, Marion is out there somewhere.' He gestured to the desert. 'I left her on the runways for you.'

Franklin swayed against the brightening air. Trippett was still conducting the propeller, impatient to join the sky. Shadows doubled themselves from Slade's heels. Franklin pressed the wound on his forehead, forcing himself to remain in time long enough to reach the aircraft. But the fugue was already beginning, the light glazed everything around him. Slade was a naked angel pinioned against the stained glass of the air.

'Doctor? I could save . . .' Slade beckoned to him, his arm forming a winged replica of itself. As he moved towards Franklin his body began to disassemble. Isolated eyes watched Franklin, mouths grimaced in the vivid light. The silver pistols multiplied.

Like dragonflies, they hovered in the air around Franklin long after the aircraft had taken off into the sky.

The sky was filled with winged men. Franklin stood among the mirrors, as the aircraft multiplied in the air and crowded the sky with endless armadas. Ursula was coming for him, she and her sisters walking across the desert from the gates of the solar city. Franklin waited for her to fetch him, glad that she had learned to feed herself. He knew that he would soon have to leave her and Soleri II, and set off in search of his wife. Happy now to be free of time, he embraced the great fugue. All the light in the universe had come here to greet him, an immense congregation of particles.

Franklin revelled in the light, as he would do when he returned to the clinic. After the long journey on foot across the desert, he at last reached the empty air base. In the evenings he sat on the roof above the runways, and remembered his drive with the old astronaut. There he rested, learning the language of the birds, waiting for his wife to emerge from the runways and bring him news from the sun.

1981

MEMORIES OF THE SPACE AGE

ONE

All day this strange pilot had flown his antique aeroplane over the abandoned space centre, a frantic machine lost in the silence of Florida. The flapping engine of the old Curtiss biplane woke Dr Mallory soon after dawn, as he lay asleep beside his exhausted wife on the fifth floor of the empty hotel in Titusville. Dreams of the space age had filled the night, memories of white runways as calm as glaciers, now broken by this eccentric aircraft veering around like the fragment of a disturbed mind.

From his balcony Mallory watched the ancient biplane circle the rusty gantries of Cape Kennedy. The sunlight flared against the pilot's helmet, illuminating the cat's-cradle of silver wires that pinioned the open fuselage between the wings, a puzzle from which the pilot was trying to escape by a series of loops and rolls. Ignoring him, the plane flew back and forth above the forest canopy, its engine calling across the immense deserted decks, as if this ghost of the pioneer days of aviation could summon the sleeping titans of the Apollo programme from their graves beneath the cracked concrete.

Giving up for the moment, the Curtiss turned from the gantries and set course inland for Titusville. As it clattered over the hotel Mallory recognised the familiar hard brow behind the pilot's goggles. Each morning the same pilot appeared, flying a succession of antique craft – relics, Mallory assumed, from some forgotten museum at a private airfield near by. There were a Spad and a Sopwith Camel, a replica of the Wright Flyer, and a Fokker triplane that had buzzed the NASA causeway the previous day, driving inland thousands of frantic gulls and swallows, denying them any share of the sky.

Standing naked on the balcony, Mallory let the amber air warm his skin. He counted the ribs below his shoulder blades, aware that for the first time he could feel his kidneys. Despite the hours spent foraging each day, and the canned food looted from the abandoned supermarkets, it was difficult to keep up his body weight. In the two months since they set out from Vancouver on the slow, nervous drive back to Florida, he and Anne had each lost more than thirty pounds, as if their bodies were carrying out a re-inventory of themselves for the coming world without time. But the bones endured. His skeleton seemed to grow stronger and heavier, preparing itself for the unnourished sleep of the grave.

* * *

Already sweating in the humid air, Mallory returned to the bedroom. Anne had woken, but lay motionless in the centre of the bed, strands of blonde hair caught like a child's in her mouth. With its fixed and empty expression, her face resembled a clock that had just stopped. Mallory sat down and placed his hands on her diaphragm, gently respiring her. Every morning he feared that time would run out for Anne while she slept, leaving her forever in the middle of a last uneasy dream.

She stared at Mallory, as if surprised to wake in this shabby resort hotel with a man she had possibly known for years but for some reason failed to recognise.

'Hinton?'

'Not yet.' Mallory steered the hair from her mouth. 'Do I look like him now?'

'God, I'm going blind.' Anne wiped her nose on the pillow. She raised her wrists, and stared at the two watches that formed a pair of time-cuffs. The stores in Florida were filled with abandoned clocks and watches, and each day Anne selected a new set of timepieces. She touched Mallory reassuringly. 'All men look the same, Edward. That's streetwalker's wisdom for you. I meant the plane.'

'I'm not sure. It wasn't a spotter aircraft. Clearly the police don't bother to come to Cape Kennedy any more.'

'I don't blame them. It's an evil place. Edward, we ought to leave, let's get out this morning.'

Mallory held her shoulders, trying to calm this frayed but still handsome woman. He needed her to look her best for Hinton. 'Anne, we've only been here a week – let's give it a little more time.'

'Time? Edward . . .' She took Mallory's hands in a sudden show of affection. 'Dear, that's one thing we've run out of. I'm getting those headaches again, just like the ones I had fifteen years ago. It's uncanny, I can feel the same nerves . . .'

'I'll give you something, you can sleep this afternoon.'

'No . . . They're a warning. I want to feel every twinge.' She pressed the wristwatches to her temples, as if trying to tune her brain to their signal. 'We were mad to come here, and even more mad to stay.'

'I know. It's a long shot but worth a try. I've learned one thing in all these years – if there's a way out, we'll find it at Cape Kennedy.'

'We won't! Everything's poisoned here. We should go to Australia, like all the other NASA people.' Anne rooted in her handbag on the floor, heaving aside an illustrated encyclopaedia of birds she had found in a Titusville bookstore. 'I looked it up – western Australia is as far from Florida as you can go. It's almost the exact antipodes. Edward, my sister lives in *Perth*. I knew there was a reason why she invited us there.'

Mallory stared at the distant gantries of Cape Kennedy. It was difficult to believe that he had once worked there. 'I don't think even Perth, Australia, is far enough. We need to set out into space again . . .'

Anne shuddered. 'Edward, don't say that – a *crime* was committed here, everyone knows that's how it all began.' As they listened to the distant drone of the aircraft she gazed at her broad hips and soft thighs. Equal to the challenge, her chin lifted. 'Do you think Hinton is here? He may not remember me.'

'He'll remember you. You were the only one who liked him.'

'Well, in a sort of way. How long was he in prison before he escaped? Twenty years?'

'A long time. Perhaps he'll take you flying again. You enjoyed that.'

'Yes . . . He was strange. But even if he is here, can he help? He was the one who started it all.'

'No, not Hinton.' Mallory listened to his voice in the empty hotel. It seemed deeper and more resonant, as the slowing time stretched out the frequencies. 'In point of fact, I started it all.'

Anne had turned from him and lay on her side, a watch pressed to each ear. Mallory reminded himself to go out and begin his morning search for food. Food, a vitamin shot, and a clean pair of sheets. Sex with Anne, which he had hoped would keep them bickering and awake, had generated affection instead. Suppose they conceived a child, here at Cape Kennedy, within the shadow of the gantries . . . ?

He remembered the mongol and autistic children he had left behind in the clinic in Vancouver, and his firm belief – strongly contested by his fellow physicians and the worn-out parents – that these were diseases of time, malfunctions of the temporal sense that marooned these children on small islands of awareness, a few minutes in the case of the mongols, a span of micro-seconds for the autistics. A child conceived and born here at Cape Kennedy would be born into a world without time, an indefinite and unending present, that primeval paradise that the old brain remembered so vividly, seen both by those living for the first time and by those dying for the first time. It was curious that images of heaven or paradise always presented a static world, not the kinetic eternity one would expect, the roller-coaster of a hyperactive funfair, the screaming Luna Parks of LSD and psilocybin. It was a strange paradox that given eternity, an infinity of time, they chose to eliminate the very element offered in such abundance.

Still, if they stayed much longer at Cape Kennedy he and Anne would soon return to the world of the old brain, like those first tragic astronauts he had helped to put into space. During the previous year in Vancouver there had been too many attacks, those periods of largo when time seemed to slow, an afternoon at his desk stretched into days. His own lapses in concentration both he and his colleagues put down to eccentricity, but Anne's growing vagueness had been impossible to ignore, the first clear signs of the space sickness that began to slow the clock, as it had done first for the astronauts and then for all the other NASA personnel based in Florida. Within the last months the attacks had come five or six

times a day, periods when everything began to slow down, and he would apparently spend all day shaving or signing a cheque.

Time, like a film reel running through a faulty projector, was moving at an erratic pace, at moments backing up and almost coming to a halt. One day it would stop, freeze forever on one frame. Had it really taken them two months to drive from Vancouver, weeks alone from Jacksonville to Cape Kennedy?

He thought of the long journey down the Florida coast, a world of immense empty hotels and glutinous time, of strange meetings with Anne in deserted corridors, of sex-acts that seemed to last for days. Now and then, in forgotten bedrooms, they came across other couples who had strayed into Florida, into the eternal present of this timeless zone, Paolo and Francesca forever embracing in the Fontainebleau Hotel. In some of those eyes there had been horror . . .

As for Anne and himself, time had run out of their marriage fifteen years ago, driven away by the spectres of the space complex, and by memories of Hinton. They had come back here like Adam and Eve returning to the Edenic paradise with an unfortunate dose of VD. Thankfully, as time evaporated, so did memory. He looked at his few possessions, now almost meaningless – the tape machine on which he recorded his steady decline; an album of nude Polaroid poses of a woman doctor he had known in Vancouver; his Gray's *Anatomy* from his student days, a unique work of fiction, pages still stained with formalin from the dissecting-room cadavers; a paperback selection of Muybridge's stop-frame photographs; and a psychoanalytic study of Simon Magus.

'Anne . . . ?' The light in the bedroom had become brighter, there was a curious glare, like the white runways of his dreams. Nothing moved, for a moment Mallory felt that they were waxworks in a museum tableau, or in a painting by Edward Hopper of a tired couple in a provincial bedroom. The dream-time was creeping up on him, about to enfold him. As always he felt no fear, his pulse was calmer . . .

There was a blare of noise outside, a shadow flashed across the balcony. The Curtiss biplane roared overhead, then sped low across the rooftops of Titusville. Roused by the sudden movement, Mallory stood up and shook himself, slapping his thighs to spur on his heart. The plane had caught him just in time.

'Anne, I think that was Hinton . . .'

She lay on her side, the watches to her ears. Mallory stroked her cheeks, but her eyes rolled away from him. She breathed peacefully with her upper lungs, her pulse as slow as a hibernating mammal's. He drew the sheet across her shoulders. She would wake in an hour's time, with a vivid memory of a single image, a rehearsal for those last seconds before time finally froze . . .

TWO

Medical case in hand, Mallory stepped into the street through the broken plate-glass window of the supermarket. The abandoned store had become his chief source of supplies. Tall palms split the sidewalks in front of the boarded-up shops and bars, providing a shaded promenade through the empty town. Several times he had been caught out in the open during an attack, but the palms had shielded his skin from the Florida sun. For reasons he had yet to understand, he liked to walk naked through the silent streets, watched by the orioles and parakeets. The naked doctor, physician to the birds . . . perhaps they would pay him in feathers, the midnight-blue tail-plumes of the macaws, the golden wings of the orioles, sufficient fees for him to build a flying machine of his own?

The medical case was heavy, loaded with packet rice, sugar, cartons of pasta. He would light a small fire on another balcony and cook up a starchy meal, carefully boiling the brackish water in the roof tank. Mallory paused in the hotel car park, gathering his strength for the climb to the fifth floor, above the rat and cockroach line. He rested in the front seat of the police patrol car they had commandeered in a deserted suburb of Jacksonville. Anne had regretted leaving behind her classy Toyota, but the exchange had been sensible. Not only would the unexpected sight of this squad car confuse any military spotter planes, but the hotted-up Dodge could outrun most light aircraft.

Mallory was relying on the car's power to trap the mysterious pilot who appeared each morning in his antique aeroplanes. He had noticed that as every day passed these veteran machines tended to be of increasingly older vintage. Sooner or later the pilot would find himself well within Mallory's reach, unable to shake off the pursuing Dodge before being forced to land at his secret airfield.

Mallory listened to the police radio, the tuneless static that reflected the huge void that lay over Florida. By contrast the air-traffic frequencies were a babel of intercom chatter, both from the big jets landing at Mobile, Atlanta and Savannah, and from military craft overflying the Bahamas. All gave Florida a wide berth. To the north of the 31st parallel life in the United States went on as before, but south of that unfenced and rarely patrolled frontier was an immense silence of deserted marinas and shopping malls, abandoned citrus farms and retirement estates, silent ghettoes and airports.

Losing interest in Mallory, the birds were rising into the air. A dappled shadow crossed the car park, and Mallory looked up as a graceful, slender-winged aircraft drifted lazily past the roof of the hotel. Its twin-bladed propeller struck the air like a child's paddle, driven at a leisurely pace by the pilot sitting astride the bicycle pedals within the transparent fuselage. A man-powered glider of advanced design, it

soared silently above the rooftops, buoyed by the thermals rising from the empty town.

'Hinton!' Certain now that he could catch the former astronaut, Mallory abandoned his groceries and pulled himself behind the wheel of the police car. By the time he started the flooded engine he had lost sight of the glider. Its delicate wings, almost as long as an airliner's, had drifted across the forest canopy, kept company by the flocks of swallows and martins that rose to inspect this timorous intruder of their air-space. Mallory reversed out of the car park and set off after the glider, veering in and out of the palms that lifted from the centre of the street.

Calming himself, he scanned the side roads, and caught sight of the machine circling the jai alai stadium on the southern outskirts of the town. A cloud of gulls surrounded the glider, some mobbing its lazy propeller, others taking up their station above its wing-tips. The pilot seemed to be urging them to follow him, enticing them with gentle rolls and yaws, drawing them back towards the sea and to the forest causeways of the space complex.

Reducing his speed, Mallory followed 300 yards behind the glider. They crossed the bridge over the Banana River, heading towards the NASA causeway and the derelict bars and motels of Cocoa Beach. The nearest of the gantries was still over a mile away to the north, but Mallory was aware that he had entered the outer zone of the space grounds. A threatening aura emanated from these ancient towers, as old in their way as the great temple columns of Karnak, bearers of a different cosmic order, symbols of a view of the universe that had been abandoned along with the state of Florida that had given them birth.

Looking down at the now clear waters of the Banana River, Mallory found himself avoiding the sombre forests that packed the causeways and concrete decks of the space complex, smothering the signs and fences, the camera towers and observation bunkers. Time was different here, as it had been at Alamagordo and Eniwetok; a psychic fissure had riven both time and space, then run deep into the minds of the people who worked here. Through that suture in his skull time leaked into the slack water below the car. The forest oaks were waiting for him to feed their roots, these motionless trees were as insane as anything in the visions of Max Ernst. There were the same insatiable birds, feeding on the vegetation that sprang from the corpses of trapped aircraft . . .

Above the causeway the gulls were wheeling in alarm, screaming against the sky. The powered glider side-slipped out of the air, circled and soared along the bridge, its miniature undercarriage only ten feet above the police car. The pilot pedalled rapidly, propeller flashing at the alarmed sun, and Mallory caught a glimpse of blonde hair and a woman's face in the transparent cockpit. A red silk scarf flew from her throat.

'Hinton!' As Mallory shouted into the noisy air the pilot leaned from the cockpit and pointed to a slip road running through the

forest towards Cocoa Beach, then banked behind the trees and vanished.

Hinton? For some bizarre reason the former astronaut was now masquerading as a woman in a blonde wig, luring him back to the space complex. The birds had been in league with him . . .

The sky was empty, the gulls had vanished across the river into the forest. Mallory stopped the car. He was about to step onto the road when he heard the drone of an aero-engine. The Fokker triplane had emerged from the space centre. It made a tight circuit of the gantries and came in across the sea. Fifty feet above the beach, it swept across the palmettos and saw-grass, its twin machine-guns pointing straight towards the police car.

Mallory began to re-start the engine, when the machine-guns above the pilot's windshield opened fire at him. He assumed that the pilot was shooting blank ammunition left over from some air display. Then the first bullets struck the metalled road a hundred feet ahead. The second burst threw the car onto its flattened front tyres, severed the door pillar by the passenger seat and filled the cabin with exploding glass. As the plane climbed steeply, about to make its second pass at him, Mallory brushed the blood-flecked glass from his chest and thighs. He leapt from the car and vaulted over the metal railings into the shallow culvert beside the bridge. His blood ran away through the water towards the waiting forest of the space grounds.

THREE

From the shelter of the culvert, Mallory watched the police car burning on the bridge. The column of oily smoke rose a thousand feet into the empty sky, a beacon visible for ten miles around the Cape. The flocks of gulls had vanished. The powered glider and its woman pilot – he remembered her warning him of the Fokker's approach – had slipped away to its lair somewhere south along the coast.

Too stunned to rest, Mallory stared at the mile-long causeway. It would take him half an hour to walk back to the mainland, an easy target for Hinton as he waited in the Fokker above the clouds. Had the former astronaut recognised Mallory and immediately guessed why the sometime NASA physician had come to search for him?

Too exhausted to swim the Banana River, Mallory waded ashore and set off through the trees. He decided to spend the afternoon in one of the abandoned motels in Cocoa Beach, then make his way back to Titusville after dark.

The forest floor was cool against his bare feet, but a soft light fell through the leafy canopy and warmed his skin. Already the blood had dried on his chest and shoulders, a vivid tracery like an aboriginal tattoo that seemed more suitable wear for this violent and uncertain realm than the clothes

he had left behind at the hotel. He passed the rusting hulk of an Airstream trailer, its steel capsule overgrown with lianas and ground ivy, as if the trees had reached up to seize a passing space-craft and dragged it down into the undergrowth. There were abandoned cars and the remains of camping equipment, moss-covered chairs and tables around old barbecue spits left here twenty years earlier when the sightseers had hurriedly vacated the state.

Mallory stepped through this terminal moraine, the elements of a forgotten theme park arranged by a demolition squad. Already he felt that he belonged to an older world within the forest, a realm of darkness, patience and unseen life. The beach was a hundred yards away, the Atlantic breakers washing the empty sand. A school of dolphins leapt cleanly through the water, on their way south to the Gulf. The birds had gone, but the fish were ready to take their place in the air.

Mallory welcomed them. He knew that he had been walking down this sand-bar for little more than half an hour, but at the same time he felt that he had been there for days, even possibly weeks and months. In part of his mind he had always been there. The minutes were beginning to stretch, urged on by this eventless universe free of birds and aircraft. His memory faltered, he was forgetting his past, the clinic at Vancouver and its wounded children, his wife asleep in the hotel at Titusville, even his own identity. A single moment was a small instalment of forever – he plucked a fern leaf and watched it for minutes as it fell slowly to the ground, deferring to gravity in the most elegant way.

Aware now that he was entering the dream-time, Mallory ran on through the trees. He was moving in slow motion, his weak legs carrying him across the leafy ground with the grace of an Olympic athlete. He raised his hand to touch a butterfly apparently asleep on the wing, embarking his outstretched fingers on an endless journey.

The forest that covered the sand-bar began to thin out, giving way to the beach-houses and motels of Cocoa Beach. A derelict hotel sat among the trees, its gates collapsed across the drive, Spanish moss hanging from a sign that advertised a zoo and theme park devoted to the space age. Through the waist-high palmettos the chromium and neon rockets rose from their stands like figures on amusement park carousels.

Laughing to himself, Mallory vaulted the gates and ran on past the rusting space-ships. Behind the theme park were overgrown tennis courts, a swimming pool and the remains of the small zoo, with an alligator pit, mammal cages and an aviary. Happily, Mallory saw that the tenants had returned to their homes. An overweight zebra dozed in his concrete enclosure, a bored tiger stared in a cross-eyed way at his own nose, and an elderly caiman sunbathed on the grass beside the alligator pit.

Time was slowing now, coming almost to a halt. Mallory hung in mid-step, his bare feet in the air above the ground. Parked on the tiled

path beside the swimming pool was a huge transparent dragon-fly, the powered glider he had chased that morning.

Two wizened cheetahs sat in the shade under its wing, watching Mallory with their prim eyes. One of them rose from the ground and slowly launched itself towards him, but it was twenty feet away and Mallory knew that it would never reach him. Its threadbare coat, refashioned from some old carpet bag, stretched itself into a lazy arch that seemed to freeze forever in mid-frame.

Mallory waited for time to stop. The waves were no longer running towards the beach, and were frozen ruffs of icing sugar. Fish hung in the sky, the wise dolphins happy to be in their new realm, faces smiling in the sun. The water spraying from the fountain at the shallow end of the pool now formed a glass parasol.

Only the cheetah was moving, still able to outrun time. It was now ten feet from him, its head tilted to one side as it aimed at Mallory's throat, its yellow claws more pointed than Hinton's bullets. But Mallory felt no fear for this violent cat. Without time it could never reach him, without time the lion could at last lie down with the lamb, the eagle with the vole.

He looked up at the vivid light, noticing the figure of a young woman who hung in the air with outstretched arms above the diving board. Suspended over the water in a swallow dive, her naked body flew as serenely as the dolphins above the sea. Her calm face gazed at the glass floor ten feet below her small, extended palms. She seemed unaware of Mallory, her eyes fixed on the mystery of her own flight, and he could see clearly the red marks left on her shoulders by the harness straps of the glider, and the silver arrow of her appendix scar pointing to her childlike pubis.

The cheetah was drawing closer now, its claws picking at the threads of dried blood that laced Mallory's shoulders, its grey muzzle retracted to show its ulcerated gums and stained teeth. If he reached out he could embrace it, comfort all the memories of Africa, soothe the violence from its old pelt . . .

FOUR

Time had flowed out of Florida, as it had from the space age. After a brief pause, like a trapped film reel running free, it sped on again, rekindling a kinetic world.

Mallory sat in a deck chair beside the pool, watching the cheetahs as they rested in the shade under the glider. They crossed and uncrossed their paws like card-dealers palming an ace, now and then lifting their noses at the scent of this strange man and his blood.

Despite their sharp teeth, Mallory felt calm and rested, a sleeper waking from a complex but satisfying dream. He was glad to be surrounded by this little zoo with its backdrop of playful rockets, as innocent as an illustration from a children's book.

The young woman stood next to Mallory, keeping a concerned watch on him. She had dressed while Mallory recovered from his collision with the cheetah. After dragging away the boisterous beast she settled Mallory in the deck chair, then pulled on a patched leather flying suit. Was this the only clothing she had ever worn? A true child of the air, born and sleeping on the wing. With her overbright mascara and blonde hair brushed into a vivid peruke, she resembled a leather-garbed parakeet, a punk madonna of the airways. Worn NASA flashes on her shoulder gave her a biker's swagger. On the name-plate above her right breast was printed: *Nightingale.*

'Poor man – are you back? You're far, far away.' Behind the child-like features, the soft mouth and boneless nose, a pair of adult eyes watched him warily. 'Hey, you – what happened to your uniform? Are you in the police?'

Mallory took her hand, touching the heavy Apollo signet ring she wore on her wedding finger. From somewhere came the absurd notion that she was married to Hinton. Then he noticed her enlarged pupils, a hint of fever.

'Don't worry – I'm a doctor, Edward Mallory. I'm on holiday here with my wife.'

'Holiday?' The girl shook her head, relieved but baffled. 'That patrol car – I thought someone had stolen your uniform while you were . . . out. Dear doctor, no one comes on holiday to Florida any more. If you don't leave soon this is one vacation that may last for ever.'

'I know . . .' Mallory looked round at the zoo with its dozing tiger, the gay fountain and cheerful rockets. This was the amiable world of the Douanier Rousseau's *Merry Jesters.* He accepted the jeans and shirt which the girl gave him. He had liked being naked, not from any exhibitionist urge, but because it suited the vanished realm he had just visited. The impassive tiger with his skin of fire belonged to that world of light. 'Perhaps I've come to the right place, though – I'd like to spend forever here. To tell the truth, I've just had a small taste of what forever is going to be like.'

'No. Thanks.' Intrigued by Mallory, the girl squatted on the grass beside him. 'Tell me, how often are you getting the attacks?'

'Every day. Probably more than I realise. And you . . . ?' When she shook her head a little too quickly, Mallory added: 'They're not that frightening, you know. In a way you want to go back.'

'I can see. Take your wife and leave – any moment now all the clocks are going to stop.'

'That's why we're here – it's our one chance. My wife has even less time left than I have. We want to come to terms with everything – whatever that means. Not much any more.'

'Doctor . . . The real Cape Kennedy is inside your head, not out here.' Clearly unsettled by the presence of this marooned physician, the girl pulled on her flying helmet. She scanned the sky, where the gulls and

swallows were again gathering, drawn into the air by the distant drone of an aero-engine. 'Listen – an hour ago you were nearly killed. I tried to warn you. Our local stunt pilot doesn't like the police.'

'So I found out. I'm glad he didn't hit you. I thought he was flying your glider.'

'Hinton? He wouldn't be seen dead in that. He needs speed. Hinton's trying to join the birds.'

'Hinton . . .' Repeating the name, Mallory felt a surge of fear and relief, realising that he was committed now to the course of action he had planned months ago when he left the clinic in Vancouver. 'So Hinton is here.'

'He's here.' The girl nodded at Mallory, still unsure that he was not a policeman. 'Not many people remember Hinton.'

'I remember Hinton.' As she fingered the Apollo signet ring he asked: 'You're not married to him?'

'To Hinton? Doctor, you have some strange ideas. What are your patients like?'

'I often wonder. But you know Hinton?'

'Who does? He has other things on his mind. He fixed the pool here, and brought me the glider from the museum at Orlando.' She added, archly: 'Disneyland East – that's what they called Cape Kennedy in the early days.'

'I remember – twenty years ago I worked for NASA.'

'So did my father.' She spoke sharply, angered by the mention of the space agency. 'He was the last astronaut – Alan Shepley – the only one who didn't come back. And the only one they didn't wait for.'

'Shepley was *your* father?' Startled, Mallory turned to look at the distant gantries of the launching grounds. 'He died in the Shuttle. Then you know that Hinton . . .'

'Doctor, I don't think it was Hinton who killed my father.' Before Mallory could speak she lowered her goggles over her eyes. 'Anyway, it doesn't matter now. The important thing is that someone will be here when he comes down.'

'You're waiting for him?'

'Shouldn't I, doctor?'

'Yes . . . but it was a long time ago. Besides, it's a million to one against him coming down here.'

'That's not true. According to Hinton, Dad may actually come down somewhere along this coast. Hinton says the orbits are starting to decay. I search the beaches every day.'

Mallory smiled at her encouragingly, admiring this spunky but sad child. He remembered the news photographs of the astronaut's daughter, Gale Shepley, a babe in arms fiercely cradled by the widow outside the court-room after the verdict. 'I hope he comes. And your little zoo, Gale?'

'Nightingale,' she corrected. 'The zoo is for Dad. I want the world to be a special place for us when we go.'

'You're leaving together?'

'In a sense – like you, doctor, and everyone else here.'

'So you do get the attacks.'

'Not often – that's why I keep moving. The birds are teaching me how to fly. Did you know that, doctor? The birds are trying to get out of time.'

Already she was distracted by the unswept sky and the massing birds. After tying up the cheetahs she made her way quickly to the glider. 'I have to leave, doctor. Can you ride a motorcycle? There's a Yamaha in the hotel lobby you can borrow.'

But before taking off she confided to Mallory: 'It's all wishful thinking, doctor, for Hinton, too. When Dad comes it won't matter any more.'

Mallory tried to help her launch the glider, but the filmy craft took off within its own length. Pedalling swiftly, she propelled it into the air, climbing over the chromium rockets of the theme park. The glider circled the hotel, then levelled its long, tapering wings and set off for the empty beaches of the north.

Restless without her, the tiger began to wrestle with the truck tyre suspended from the ceiling of its cage. For a moment Mallory was tempted to unlock the door and join it. Avoiding the cheetahs chained to the diving board, he entered the empty hotel and took the staircase to the roof. From the ladder of the elevator house he watched the glider moving towards the space centre.

Alan Shepley – the first man to be murdered in space. All too well Mallory remembered the young pilot of the Shuttle, one of the last astronauts to be launched from Cape Kennedy before the curtain came down on the space age. A former Apollo pilot, Shepley had been a dedicated but likable young man, as ambitious as the other astronauts and yet curiously naïve.

Mallory, like everyone else, had much preferred him to the Shuttle's co-pilot, a research physicist who was then the token civilian among the astronauts. Mallory remembered how he had instinctively disliked Hinton on their first meeting at the medical centre. But from the start he had been fascinated by the man's awkwardness and irritability. In its closing days, the space programme had begun to attract people who were slightly unbalanced, and he recognised that Hinton belonged to this second generation of astronauts, mavericks with complex motives of their own, quite unlike the disciplined service pilots who had furnished the Mercury and Apollo flight-crews. Hinton had the intense and obsessive temperament of a Cortez, Pizarro or Drake, the hot blood and cold heart. It was Hinton who had exposed for the first time so many of the latent conundrums at the heart of the space programme, those psychological dimensions that had been ignored from its start and subsequently revealed, too late, in the crack-ups of the early astronauts, their slides into mysticism and melancholia.

'The best astronauts never dream,' Russell Schweickart had once remarked. Not only did Hinton dream, he had torn the whole fabric of time and space, cracked the hour-glass from which time was running. Mallory was aware of his own complicity, he had been chiefly responsible for putting Shepley and Hinton together, guessing that the repressed and earnest Shepley might provide the trigger for a metaphysical experiment of a special sort.

At all events, Shepley's death had been the first murder in space, a crisis that Mallory had both stage-managed and unconsciously welcomed. The murder of the astronaut and the public unease that followed had marked the end of the space age, an awareness that man had committed an evolutionary crime by travelling into space, that he was tampering with the elements of his own consciousness. The fracture of that fragile continuum erected by the human psyche through millions of years had soon shown itself, in the confused sense of time displayed by the inhabitants of the towns near the space centre. Cape Kennedy and the whole of Florida itself became a poisoned land to be forever avoided like the nuclear testing grounds of Nevada and Utah.

Yet, perhaps, instead of going mad in space, Hinton had been the first man to 'go sane'. During his trial he pleaded his innocence and then refused to defend himself, viewing the international media circus with a stoicism that at times seemed bizarre. That silence had unnerved everyone – how could Hinton believe himself innocent of a murder (he had locked Shepley into the docking module, vented his air supply and then cast him loose in his coffin, keeping up a matter-of-fact commentary the whole while) committed in full view of a thousand million television witnesses?

Alcatraz had been re-commissioned for Hinton, for this solitary prisoner isolated on the frigid island to prevent him contaminating the rest of the human race. After twenty years he was safely forgotten, and even the report of his escape was only briefly mentioned. He was presumed to have died, after crashing into the icy waters of the bay in a small aircraft he had secretly constructed. Mallory had travelled down to San Francisco to see the waterlogged craft, a curious ornithopter built from the yew trees that Hinton had been allowed to grow in the prison island's stony soil, boosted by a home-made rocket engine powered by a fertiliser-based explosive. He had waited twenty years for the slow-growing evergreens to be strong enough to form the wings that would carry him to freedom.

Then, only six months after Hinton's death, Mallory had been told by an old NASA colleague of the strange stunt pilot who had been seen flying his antique aircraft at Cape Kennedy, some native of the air who had so far eluded the half-hearted attempts to ground him. The descriptions of the bird-cage aeroplanes reminded Mallory of the drowned ornithopter dragged up onto the winter beach . . .

So Hinton had returned to Cape Kennedy. As Mallory set off on the Yamaha along the coast road, past the deserted motels and cocktail bars

of Cocoa Beach, he looked out at the bright Atlantic sand, so unlike the rocky shingle of the prison island. But was the ornithopter a decoy, like all the antique aircraft that Hinton flew above the space centre, machines that concealed some other aim?

Some other escape?

FIVE

Fifteen minutes later, as Mallory sped along the NASA causeway towards Titusville, he was overtaken by an old Wright biplane. Crossing the Banana River, he noticed that the noise of a second engine had drowned the Yamaha's. The venerable flying machine appeared above the trees, the familiar gaunt-faced pilot sitting in the open cockpit. Barely managing to pull ahead of the Yamaha, the pilot flew down to within ten feet of the road, gesturing to Mallory to stop, then cut back his engine and settled the craft onto the weed-grown concrete.

'Mallory, I've been looking for you! Come on, doctor!'

Mallory hesitated, the gritty backwash of the Wright's props stinging the open wounds under his shirt. As he peered among the struts Hinton seized his arm and lifted him onto the passenger seat.

'Mallory, yes . . . it's you still!' Hinton pushed his goggles back onto his bony forehead, revealing a pair of blood-flecked eyes. He gazed at Mallory with open amazement, as if surprised that Mallory had aged at all in the past twenty years, but delighted that he had somehow survived. 'Nightingale just told me you were here. Doctor Mysterium . . . I nearly killed you!'

'You're trying again . . . !' Mallory clung to the frayed seat straps as Hinton opened the throttle. The biplane gazelled into the air. In a gust of wind across the exposed causeway it flew backwards for a few seconds, then climbed vertically and banked across the trees towards the distant gantries. Thousands of swallows and martins overtook them on all sides, ignoring Hinton as if well used to this erratic aviator and his absurd machines.

As Hinton worked the rudder tiller, Mallory glanced at this feverish and undernourished man. The years in prison and the rushing air above Cape Kennedy had leached all trace of iron salts from his pallid skin. His raw eyelids, the nail-picked septum of his strong nose and his scarred lips were blanched almost silver in the wind. He had gone beyond exhaustion and malnutrition into a nervous realm where the rival elements of his warring mind were locked together like the cogs of an overwound clock. As he pummelled Mallory's arm it was clear that he had already forgotten the years since their last meeting. He pointed to the forest below them, to the viaducts, concrete decks and blockhouses, eager to show off his domain.

They had reached the heart of the space complex, where the gantries rose like gallows put out to rent. In the centre was the giant crawler,

the last of the Shuttles mounted vertically on its launching platform. Its rusting tracks lay around it, the chains of an unshackled colossus.

Here at Cape Kennedy time had not stood still but moved into reverse. The huge fuel tank and auxiliary motors of the Shuttle resembled the domes and minarets of a replica Taj Mahal. Lines of antique aircraft were drawn up on the runway below the crawler – a Lilienthal glider lying on its side like an ornate fan window, a Mignet Flying Flea, the Fokker, Spad and Sopwith Camel, and a Wright Flyer that went back to the earliest days of aviation. As they circled the launch platform Mallory almost expected to see a crowd of Edwardian aviators thronging this display of ancient craft, pilots in gaiters and overcoats, women passengers in hats fitted with leather straps.

Other ghosts haunted the daylight at Cape Kennedy. When they landed Mallory stepped into the shadow of the launch platform, an iron cathedral shunned by the sky. An unsettling silence came in from the dense forest that filled the once-open decks of the space centre, from the eyeless bunkers and rusting camera towers.

'Mallory, I'm glad you came!' Hinton pulled off his flying helmet, exposing a lumpy scalp under his close-cropped hair – Mallory remembered that he had once been attacked by a berserk warder. 'I couldn't believe it was you! And Anne? Is she all right?'

'She's here, at the hotel in Titusville.'

'I know, I've just seen her on the roof. She looked . . .' Hinton's voice dropped, in his concern he had forgotten what he was doing. He began to walk in a circle, and then rallied himself. 'Still, it's good to see you. It's more than I hoped for – you were the one person who knew what was going on here.'

'Did I?' Mallory searched for the sun, hidden behind the cold bulk of the launch platform. Cape Kennedy was even more sinister than he had expected, like some ancient death camp. 'I don't think I –'

'Of course you knew! In a way we were collaborators – believe me, Mallory, we will be again. I've a lot to tell you . . .' Happy to see Mallory, but concerned for the shivering physician, Hinton embraced him with his restless hands. When Mallory flinched, trying to protect his shoulders, Hinton whistled and peered solicitously inside his shirt.

'Mallory, I'm sorry – that police car confused me. They'll be coming for me soon, we have to move fast. But you don't look too well, doctor. Time's running out, I suppose, it's difficult to understand at first . . .'

'I'm starting to. What about you, Hinton? I need to talk to you about everything. You look –'

Hinton grimaced. He slapped his hip, impatient with his undernourished body, an atrophied organ that he would soon discard. 'I had to starve myself, the wingloading of that machine was so low. It took years, or they might have noticed. Those endless medical checks, they were terrified that I was brewing up an even more advanced psychosis – they couldn't

grasp that I was opening the door to a new world.' He gazed round at the space centre, at the empty wind. 'We had to get out of time – that's what the space programme was all about . . .'

He beckoned Mallory towards a steel staircase that led up to the assembly deck six storeys above them. 'We'll go topside. I'm living in the Shuttle – there's a crew module of the Mars platform still inside the hold, a damn sight more comfortable than most of the hotels in Florida.' He added, with an ironic gleam: 'I imagine it's the last place they'll come to look for me.'

Mallory began to climb the staircase. He tried not to touch the greasy rivets and sweating rails, lowering his eyes from the tiled skin of the Shuttle as it emerged above the assembly deck. After all the years of thinking about Cape Kennedy he was still unprepared for the strangeness of this vast, reductive machine, a Juggernaut that could be pushed by its worshippers across the planet, devouring the years and hours and seconds.

Even Hinton seemed subdued, scanning the sky as if waiting for Shepley to appear. He was careful not to turn his back on Mallory, clearly suspecting that the former NASA physician had been sent to trap him.

'Flight and time, Mallory, they're bound together. The birds have always known that. To get out of time we first need to learn to fly. That's why I'm here. I'm teaching myself to fly, going back through all these old planes to the beginning. I want to fly without wings . . .'

As the Shuttle's delta wing fanned out above them, Mallory swayed against the rail. Exhausted by the climb, he tried to pump his lungs. The silence was too great, this stillness at the centre of the stopped clock of the world. He searched the breathless forest and runways for any sign of movement. He needed one of Hinton's machines to take off and go racketing across the sky.

'Mallory, you're going . . . ? Don't worry, I'll help you through it.' Hinton had taken his elbow and steadied him on his feet. Mallory felt the light suddenly steepen, the intense white glare he had last seen as the cheetah sprang towards him. Time left the air, wavered briefly as he struggled to retain his hold on the passing seconds.

A flock of martins swept across the assembly deck, swirled like exploding soot around the Shuttle. Were they trying to warn him? Roused by the brief flurry, Mallory felt his eyes clear. He had been able to shake off the attack, but it would come again.

'Doctor –? You'll be all right.' Hinton was plainly disappointed as he watched Mallory steady himself at the rail. 'Try not to fight it, doctor, everyone makes that mistake.'

'It's going . . .' Mallory pushed him away. Hinton was too close to the rail, the man's manic gestures could jostle him over the edge. 'The birds –'

'Of course, we'll join the birds! Mallory, we can all fly, every one of us. Think of it, doctor, true flight. We'll live forever in the air!'

'Hinton . . .' Mallory backed along the deck as Hinton seized the greasy rail, about to catapult himself onto the wind. He needed to get away from this madman and his lunatic schemes.

Hinton waved to the aircraft below, saluting the ghosts in their cockpits. 'Lilienthal and the Wrights, Curtiss and Blériot, even old Mignet – they're here, doctor. That's why I came to Cape Kennedy. I needed to go back to the beginning, long before aviation sent us all off on the wrong track. When time stops, Mallory, we'll step from this deck and fly towards the sun. You and I, doctor, and Anne . . .'

Hinton's voice was deepening, a cavernous boom. The white flank of the Shuttle's hull was a lantern of translucent bone, casting a spectral light over the sombre forest. Mallory swayed forward, on some half-formed impulse he wanted Hinton to vault the rail, step out onto the air and challenge the birds. If he pressed his shoulders . . .

'Doctor –?'

Mallory raised his hands, but he was unable to draw any nearer to Hinton. Like the cheetah, he was forever a few inches away.

Hinton had taken his arm in a comforting gesture, urging him towards the rail.

'Fly, doctor . . .'

Mallory stood at the edge. His skin had become part of the air, invaded by the light. He needed to shrug aside the huge encumbrance of time and space, this rusting deck and the clumsy tracked vehicle. He could hang free, suspended forever above the forest, master of time and light. He would fly . . .

A flurry of charged air struck his face. Fracture lines appeared in the wind around him. The transparent wings of a powered glider soared past, its propeller chopping at the sunlight.

Hinton's hands gripped his shoulders, bundling him impatiently over the rail. The glider slewed sideways, wheeled and flew towards them again. The sunlight lanced from its propeller, a stream of photons that drove time back into Mallory's eyes. Pulling himself free from Hinton, he fell to his knees as the young woman swept past in her glider. He saw her anxious face behind the goggles, and heard her voice shout warningly at Hinton.

But Hinton had already gone. His feet rang against the metal staircase. As he took off in the Fokker he called out angrily to Mallory, disappointed with him. Mallory knelt by the edge of the steel deck, waiting for time to flow back into his mind, hands gripping the oily rail with the strength of the new-born.

SIX

TAPE 24: *17 August.*
Again, no sign of Hinton today.

Anne is asleep. An hour ago, when I returned from the drugstore, she looked at me with focused eyes for the first time in a week. By an effort I managed to feed her in the few minutes she was fully awake. Time has virtually stopped for her, there are long periods when she is clearly in an almost stationary world, a series of occasionally varying static tableaux. Then she wakes briefly and starts talking about Hinton and a flight to Miami she is going to make with him in his Cessna. Yet she seems refreshed by these journeys into the light, as if her mind is drawing nourishment from the very fact that no time is passing.

I feel the same, despite the infected wound on my shoulder – Hinton's dirty fingernails. The attacks come a dozen times a day, everything slows to a barely perceptible flux. The intensity of light is growing, photons backing up all the way to the sun. As I left the drugstore I watched a parakeet cross the road over my head; it seemed to take two hours to fly fifty feet.

Perhaps Anne has another week before time stops for her. As for myself, three weeks? It's curious to think that at, say, precisely 3.47 p.m., 8 September, time will stop forever. A single micro-second will flash past unnoticed for everyone else, but for me will last an eternity. I'd better decide how I want to spend it!

TAPE 25: ***19 August.***

A hectic two days. Anne had a relapse at noon yesterday, vaso-vagal shock brought on by waking just as Hinton strafed the hotel in his Wright Flyer. I could barely detect her heartbeat, spent hours massaging her calves and thighs (I'd happily go out into eternity caressing my wife). I managed to stand her up, walked her up and down the balcony in the hope that the noise of Hinton's aircraft might jolt her back onto the rails. In fact, this morning she spoke to me in a completely lucid way, obviously appalled by my derelict appearance. For her it's one of those quiet afternoons three weeks ago.

We could still leave, start up one of the abandoned cars and reach the border at Jacksonville before the last minutes run out. I have to keep reminding myself why we came here in the first place. Running north will solve nothing. If there's a solution it's here, somewhere between Hinton's obsessions and Shepley's orbiting coffin, between the space centre and those bright, eerie transits that are all too visible at night. I hope I don't go out just as it arrives, spend the rest of eternity looking at the vaporising corpse of the man I helped to die in space. I keep thinking of that tiger. Somehow I can calm it.

TAPE 26: ***25 August.***

3.30 p.m. The first uninterrupted hour of conscious time I've had in days. When I woke fifteen minutes ago Hinton had just finished strafing the hotel – the palms were shaking dust and insects all over the balcony. Clearly Hinton is trying to keep us awake, postponing the end until he's

ready to play his last card, or perhaps until I'm out of the way and he's free to be with Anne.

I'm still thinking about his motives. He seems to have embraced the destruction of time, as if this whole malaise were an opportunity that we ought to seize, the next evolutionary step forward. He was steering me to the edge of the assembly deck, urging me to fly; if Gale Shepley hadn't appeared in her glider I would have dived over the rail. In a strange way he was helping me, guiding me into that new world without time. When he turned Shepley loose from the Shuttle he didn't think he was killing him, but setting him free.

The ever more primitive aircraft – Hinton's quest for a pure form of flight, which he will embark upon at the last moment. A Santos-Dumont flew over yesterday, an ungainly box-kite, he's given up his World War I machines. He's deliberately flying badly designed aircraft, all part of his attempt to escape from winged aviation into absolute flight, poetical rather than aeronautical structures.

The roots of shamanism and levitation, and the erotic cathexis of flight – can one see them as an attempt to escape from time? The shaman's supposed ability to leave his physical form and fly with his spiritual body, the psychopomp guiding the souls of the deceased and able to achieve a mastery of fire, together seem to be linked with those defects of the vestibular apparatus brought on by prolonged exposure to zero gravity during the space flights. We should have welcomed them.

That tiger – I'm becoming obsessed with the notion that it's on fire.

TAPE 27: ***28 August.***

An immense silence today, not a murmur over the soft green deck of Florida. Hinton may have killed himself. Perhaps all this flying is some kind of expiatory ritual, when he dies the shaman's curse will be lifted. But do I want to go back into time? By contrast, that static world of brilliant light pulls at the heart like a vision of Eden. If time *is* a primitive mental structure we're right to reject it. There's a sense in which not only the shaman's but all mystical and religious beliefs are an attempt to devise a world without time. Why did primitive man, who needed a brain only slightly larger than the tiger in Gale's zoo, in fact have a mind almost equal to those of Freud and Leonardo? Perhaps all that surplus neural capacity was there to release him from time, and it has taken the space age, and the sacrifice of the first astronaut, to achieve that single goal.

Kill Hinton . . . How, though?

TAPE 28: ***3 September.***

Missing days. I'm barely aware of the flux of time any longer. Anne lies on the bed, wakes for a few minutes and makes a futile attempt to reach the roof, as if the sky offers some kind of escape. I've just brought her down from the staircase. It's too much of an effort to forage for food, on my way to the supermarket this morning the light was so bright that I

had to close my eyes, hand-holding my way around the streets like a blind beggar. I seemed to be standing on the floor of an immense furnace.

Anne is increasingly restless, murmuring to herself in some novel language, as if preparing for a journey. I recorded one of her drawn-out monologues, like some Gaelic love-poem, then speeded it up to normal time. An agonised 'Hinton . . . Hinton . . .'

It's taken her twenty years to learn.

Tape 29: *6 September.*

There can't be more than a few days left. The dream-time comes on a dozen stretches each day, everything slows to a halt. From the balcony I've just watched a flock of orioles cross the street. They seemed to take hours, their unmoving wings supporting them as they hung above the trees.

At last the birds have learned to fly.

Anne is awake . . .

(Anne): Who's learned to fly?

(EM): It's all right – the birds.

(Anne): Did you teach them? What am I talking about? How long have I been away?

(EM): Since dawn. Tell me what you were dreaming.

(Anne): Is this a dream? Help me up. God, it's dark in the street. There's no time left here. Edward, find Hinton. Do whatever he says.

SEVEN

Kill Hinton . . .

As the engine of the Yamaha clacked into life, Mallory straddled the seat and looked back at the hotel. At any moment, as if seizing the last few minutes left to her, Anne would leave the bedroom and try to make her way to the roof. The stationary clocks in Titusville were about to tell the real time for her, eternity for this lost woman would be a flight of steps around an empty elevator shaft.

Kill Hinton . . . he had no idea how. He set off through the streets to the east of Titusville, shakily weaving in and out of the abandoned cars. With its stiff gearbox and unsteady throttle the Yamaha was exhausting to control. He was driving through an unfamiliar suburb of the town, a terrain of tract houses, shopping malls and car parks laid out for the NASA employees in the building boom of the 1960s. He passed an overturned truck that had spilled its cargo of television sets across the road, and a laundry van that had careened through the window of a liquor store.

Three miles to the east were the gantries of the space centre. An aircraft hung in the air above them, a primitive helicopter with an overhead propeller. The tapering blades were stationary, as if Hinton had at last managed to dispense with wings.

Mallory pressed on towards the Cape, the engine of the motorcycle

at full throttle. The tracts of suburban housing unravelled before him, endlessly repeating themselves, the same shopping malls, bars and motels, the same stores and used-car lots that he and Anne had seen in their journey across the continent. He could almost believe that he was driving through Florida again, through the hundreds of small towns that merged together, a suburban universe in which these identical liquor stores, car parks and shopping malls formed the building blocks of a strand of urban DNA generated by the nucleus of the space centre. He had driven down this road, across these silent intersections, not for minutes or hours but for years and decades. The unravelling strand covered the entire surface of the globe, and then swept out into space to pave the walls of the universe before it curved back on itself to land here at its departure point at the space centre. Again he passed the overturned truck beside its scattered television sets, again the laundry van in the liquor store window. He would forever pass them, forever cross the same intersection, see the same rusty sign above the same motel cabin . . .

'Doctor . . . !'

The smell of burning flesh quickened in Mallory's nose. His right calf was pressed against the exhaust manifold of the idling Yamaha. Charred fragments of his cotton trouser clung to the raw wound. As the young woman in the black flying suit ran across the street Mallory pushed himself away from the clumsy machine, stumbled over its spinning wheels and knelt in the road.

He had stopped at an intersection half a mile from the centre of Titusville. The vast planetary plain of parking lots had withdrawn, swirled down some cosmic funnel and then contracted to this small suburban enclave of a single derelict motel, two tract houses and a bar. Twenty feet away the blank screens of the television sets stared at him from the road beside the overturned truck. A few steps further along the sidewalk the laundry van lay in its liquor store window, dusty bottles of vodka and bourbon shaded by the wing-tip of the glider which Gale Shepley had landed in the street.

'Dr Mallory! Can you hear me? Dear man . . .' She pushed back Mallory's head and peered into his eyes, then switched off the still-clacking engine of the Yamaha. 'I saw you sitting here, there was something . . . My God, your leg! Did Hinton . . . ?'

'No . . . I set fire to myself.' Mallory climbed to his feet, an arm around the girl's shoulder. He was still trying to clear his head, there was something curiously beguiling about that vast suburban world . . . 'I was a fool trying to ride it. I must see Hinton.'

'Doctor, listen to me . . .' The girl shook his hands, her eyes wide with fever. Her mascara and hair were even more bizarre than he remembered. 'You're dying! A day or two more, an hour maybe, you'll be gone. We'll find a car and I'll drive you north.' With an effort she took her eyes from

the sky. 'I don't like to leave Dad, but you've got to get away from here, it's inside your head now.'

Mallory tried to lift the heavy Yamaha. 'Hinton – it's all that's left now. For Anne, too. Somehow I have to . . . kill him.'

'He knows that, doctor—' She broke off at the sound of an approaching aero-engine. An aircraft was hovering over the nearby streets, its shadowy bulk visible through the palm leaves, the flicker of a rotor blade across the sun. As they crouched among the television sets it passed above their heads. An antique autogyro, it lumbered through the air like an aerial harvester, its free-spinning rotor apparently powered by the sunlight. Sitting in the open cockpit, the pilot was too busy with his controls to search the streets below.

Besides, as Mallory knew, Hinton had already found his quarry. Standing on the roof of the hotel, a dressing gown around her shoulders, was Anne Mallory. At last she had managed to climb the stairs, driven on by her dream of the sky. She stared sightlessly at the autogyro, stepping back a single pace only when it circled the hotel and came in to land through a storm of leaves and dust. When it touched down on the roof the draught from its propellers stripped the gown from her shoulders. Naked, she turned to face the autogyro, lover of this strange machine come to save her from a time-reft world.

EIGHT

As they reached the NASA causeway huge columns of smoke were rising from the space centre. From the pillion seat of the motorcycle Mallory looked up at the billows boiling into the stained air. The forest was flushed with heat, the foliage glowing like furnace coals.

Had Hinton refuelled the Shuttle's engines and prepared the craft for lift-off? He would take Anne with him, and cast them both loose into space as he had done with Shepley, joining the dead astronaut in his orbital bier.

Smoke moved through the trees ahead of them, driven by the explosions coming from the launch site of the Shuttle. Gale throttled back the Yamaha and pointed to a break in the clouds. The Shuttle still sat on its platform, motors silent, the white hull reflecting the flash of explosions from the concrete runways.

Hinton had set fire to his antique planes. Thick with oily smoke, the flames lifted from the glowing shells slumped on their undercarts. The Curtiss biplane was burning briskly. A frantic blaze devoured the engine compartment of the Fokker, detonated the fuel tank and set off the machine-gun ammunition. The exploding cartridges kicked through the wings as they folded like a house of cards.

Gale steadied the Yamaha with her feet, and skirted the glowing trees 200 yards from the line of incandescent machines. The explosions flashed

in her goggles, blanching her vivid make-up and giving her blonde hair an ash-like whiteness. The heat flared against Mallory's sallow face as he searched the aircraft for any sign of Hinton. Fanned by the flames that roared from its fuselage, the autogyro's propeller rotated swiftly, caught fire and spun in a last blazing carnival. Beside it, flames raced along the wings of the Wright Flyer; in a shower of sparks the burning craft lifted into the air and fell back upon the Sopwith Camel. Ignited by the intense heat, the primed engine of the Flying Flea roared into life, propelled the tiny aircraft in a scurrying arc among the burning wrecks, setting off the Spad and Blériot before it overturned in a furnace of rolling flame.

'Doctor – on the assembly deck!'

Mallory followed the girl's raised hand. A hundred feet above them, Anne and Hinton stood side by side on the metal landing of the stairway. The flames from the burning aircraft wavered against their faces, as if they were already moving through the air together. Although Hinton's hand was around Anne's waist, they seemed unaware of each other when they stepped forward into the light.

NINE

As always during his last afternoons at Cocoa Beach, Mallory rested by the swimming pool of the abandoned hotel, watching the pale glider float patiently across the undisturbed skies of Cape Kennedy. In this peaceful arbour, surrounded by the drowsing inmates of the zoo, he listened to the fountain cast its crystal gems onto the grass beside his chair. The spray of water was now almost stationary, like the glider and the wind and the watching cheetahs, elements of an emblematic and glowing world.

As time slipped away from him, Mallory stood under the fountain, happy to see it transform itself into a glass tree that shed an opalescent fruit onto his shoulders and hands. Dolphins flew through the air over the nearby sea. Once he immersed himself in the pool, delighted to be embedded in this huge block of condensed time.

Fortunately, Gale Shepley had rescued him before he drowned. Mallory knew that she was becoming bored with him. She was intent now only on the search for her father, confident that he would soon be returning from the tideways of space. At night the trajectories were ever lower, tracks of charged particles that soared across the forest. She had almost ceased to eat, and Mallory was glad that once her father arrived she would at last give up her flying. Then the two of them would leave together.

Mallory had made his own preparations for departure. The key to the tiger cage he held always in his hand. There was little time left to him now, the light-filled world had transformed itself into a series of tableaux from a pageant that celebrated the founding days of creation. In the finale every element in the universe, however humble, would take its place on the stage in front of him.

He watched the tiger waiting for him at the bars of its cage. The great cats, like the reptiles before them, had always stood partly out of time. The flames that marked its pelt reminded him of the fire that had consumed the aircraft at the space centre, the fire through which Anne and Hinton still flew forever.

He left the pool and walked towards the tiger cage. He would unlock the door soon, embrace these flames, lie down with this beast in a world beyond time.

1982

MYTHS OF THE NEAR FUTURE

At dusk Sheppard was still sitting in the cockpit of the stranded aircraft, unconcerned by the evening tide that advanced towards him across the beach. Already the first waves had reached the wheels of the Cessna, kicking spurs of spray against the fuselage. Tirelessly, the dark night-water sluiced its luminous foam at the Florida shoreline, as if trying to rouse the spectral tenants of the abandoned bars and motels.

But Sheppard sat calmly at the controls, thinking of his dead wife and all the drained swimming pools of Cocoa Beach, and of the strange nightclub he had glimpsed that afternoon through the forest canopy now covering the old Space Centre. Part Las Vegas casino with its flamboyant neon façade, and part Petit Trianon – a graceful classical pediment carried the chromium roof – it had suddenly materialized among the palms and tropical oaks, more unreal than any film set. As Sheppard soared past, only fifty feet above its mirrored roof, he had almost expected to see Marie Antoinette herself, in a Golden Nugget get-up, playing the milkmaid to an audience of uneasy alligators.

Before their divorce, oddly enough, Elaine had always enjoyed their weekend expeditions from Toronto to Algonquin Park, proudly roughing the wilderness in the high-chrome luxury of their Airstream trailer, as incongruous among the pine cones and silver birch as this latter-day fragment of a neon Versailles. All the same, the sight of the bizarre nightclub hidden deep in the Cape Kennedy forests, and the curious behaviour of its tenants, convinced Sheppard that Elaine was still alive, and very probably held prisoner by Philip Martinsen. The chromium nightclub, presumably built thirty years earlier by some classically minded Disneyland executive, would appeal to the young neurosurgeon's sense of the absurd, a suitably garish climax to the unhappy events that had brought them together in the sombre forests of the Florida peninsula.

However, Martinsen was devious enough to have picked the nightclub deliberately, part of his elaborate attempt to lure Sheppard into the open air. For weeks now he had been hanging around the deserted motels in Cocoa Beach, flying his kites and gliders, eager to talk to Sheppard but nervous of approaching the older man. From the safety of his darkened bedroom at the Starlight Motel – a huddle of dusty cabins on the coast road – Sheppard watched him through a crack in the double blinds. Every day Martinsen waited for Sheppard to appear, but was always careful to keep a drained swimming pool between them.

At first the young doctor's obsession with birds had irritated Sheppard – everything from the papier-mâché condor-kites hanging like corpses above the motel to endless Picasso doves chalked on the cabin doors while Sheppard slept. Even now, as he sat on the beach in the wave-washed Cessna, he could see the snake-headed profile cut in the wet sand, part of an enormous Aztec bird across which he had landed an hour earlier.

The birds . . . Elaine had referred to them in the last of her Florida letters, but those were creatures who soared inside her own head, far more exotic than anything a neurourgeon could devise, feathered and jewelled chimeras from the paradises of Gustave Moreau. None the less, Sheppard had finally taken the bait, accepting that Martinsen wanted to talk to him, and on his own terms. He forced himself from the motel, hiding behind the largest sunglasses he could find among the hundreds that littered the floor of the swimming pool, and drove to the light airfield at Titusville. For an hour he flew the rented Cessna across the forest canopy, searching the whole of Cape Kennedy for any sign of Martinsen and his kites.

Tempted to turn back, he soared to and fro above the abandoned space grounds, unsettling though they were, with their immense runways leading to no conceivable sky, and the rusting gantries like so many deaths propped up in their tattered coffins. Here at Cape Kennedy a small part of space had died. A rich emerald light glowed through the forest, as if from a huge lantern lit at the heart of the Space Centre. This resonant halo, perhaps the phosphorescence of some unusual fungi on the leaves and branches, was spreading outwards and already had reached the northern streets of Cocoa Beach and crossed the Indian River to Titusville. Even the ramshackle stores and houses vibrated in the same overlit way.

Around him the bright winds were like the open jaws of a crystal bird, the light flashing between its teeth. Sheppard clung to the safety of the jungle canopy, banking the Cessna among the huge flocks of flamingos and orioles that scattered out of his way. In Titusville a government patrol car moved down one of the few stretches of clear road, but no one else was tempted out of doors, the few inhabitants resting in their bedrooms as the forest climbed the Florida peninsula and closed around them.

Then, almost in the shadow of the Apollo 12 gantry, Sheppard had seen the nightclub. Startled by its neon façade, he stalled the Cessna. The wheels rattled the palm fronds as he throttled up a saving burst of speed and began a second circuit. The nightclub sat in a forest clearing beside a shallow inlet of the Banana River, near a crumbling camera blockhouse at the end of a concrete runway. The jungle pressed towards the nightclub on three sides, a gaudy aviary of parakeets and macaws, some long-vanished tycoon's weekend paradise.

As the birds hurtled past the windshield, Sheppard saw two figures running towards the forest, a bald-headed woman in the grey shroud of a hospital gown followed by a familiar dark-faced man with the firm step of a warder at a private prison. Despite her age, the woman fled lightly along the ground and seemed almost to be trying to fly. Confused by the

noise of the Cessna, her white hands waved a distraught semaphore at the startled macaws, as if hoping to borrow their lurid plumage to cover her bare scalp.

Trying to recognize his wife in this deranged figure, Sheppard turned away for another circuit, and lost his bearings among the maze of inlets and concrete causeways that lay beneath the forest canopy. When he again picked out the nightclub he throttled back and soared in above the trees, only to find his glide-path blocked by a man-powered aircraft that had lifted into the air from the forest clearing.

Twice the size of the Cessna, this creaking cat's-cradle of plastic film and piano wire wavered to left and right in front of Sheppard, doing its best to distract him. Dazzled by his own propeller, Sheppard banked and overflew the glider, and caught a last glimpse of the dark-bearded Martinsen pedalling intently inside his transparent envelope, a desperate fish hung from the sky. Then the waiting bough of a forest oak clipped the Cessna as it overran its own slipstream. The sharp antlers stripped the fabric from the starboard wing and tore off the passenger door. Stunned by the roaring air, Sheppard limped the craft back to Cocoa Beach, and brought it down to a heavy landing on the wet sand within the diagram of the immense beaked raptor which Martinsen had carved for him that morning.

Waves washed into the open cabin of the Cessna, flicking a cold foam at Sheppard's ankles. Headlamps approached along the beach, and a government jeep raced down to the water's edge a hundred yards from the aircraft. The young driver stood against the windshield, shouting at Sheppard over her headlamps.

Sheppard released the harness, still reluctant to leave the Cessna. The night had come in from the sea, and now covered the shabby coastal town, but everything was still lit by that same luminescence he had glimpsed from the air, a flood of photons released from the pavilion in the forest where his wife was held prisoner. The waves that washed the propeller of the Cessna, the empty bars and motels along the beach, and the silent gantries of the Space Centre were decorated with millions of miniature lights, lode-points that marked the profiles of a new realm waiting to reconstitute itself around him. Thinking of the nightclub, Sheppard stared into the firefly darkness that enveloped Cape Kennedy. Already he suspected that this was a first glimpse of a small corner of the magnetic city, a suburb of the world beyond time that lay around and within him.

Holding its image to his mind, he forced the door against the flood and jumped down into the waist-deep water as the last of the night came in on the waves. In the glare of the jeep's headlamps he felt Anne Godwin's angry hands on his shoulders, and fell headlong into the water. Skirt floating around her hips, she pulled him like a drowned pilot on to the beach and held him to the warm sand as the sea

rushed into the silver gullies of the great bird whose wings embraced them.

Yet, for all the confusions of the flight, at least he had been able to go outside. Three months earlier, when Sheppard arrived at Cocoa Beach, he had broken into the first motel he could find and locked himself for ever into the safety of a darkened bedroom. The journey from Toronto had been a succession of nightmare way-stations, long delays in semi-derelict bus depots and car-rental offices, queasy taxi-rides slumped in the rear seat behind two pairs of dark glasses, coat pulled over his head like a Victorian photographer nervous of his own lens. As he moved south into the steeper sunlight the landscapes of New Jersey, Virginia and the Carolinas seemed both lurid and opaque, the half-empty towns and uncrowded highways perceived on a pair of raw retinas inflamed by LSD. At times he seemed to be looking at the interior of the sun from a precarious gondola suspended at its core, through an air like fire-glass that might melt the dusty windows of his taxi.

Even Toronto, and his rapid decline after the divorce from Elaine, had not warned him of the real extent of his retreat behind his own nerve-endings. Surrounded by the deserted city, it surprised Sheppard that he was one of the last to be affected, this outwardly cool architect who concealed what was in fact a powerful empathy for other people's psychological ills. A secretary's headache would send him on a restless tour of the design offices. Often he felt that he himself had invented the dying world around him.

It was now twenty years since the earliest symptoms of this strange malaise – the so-called 'space sickness' – had made their appearance. At first touching only a small minority of the population, it took root like a lingering disease in the interstices of its victims' lives, in the slightest changes of habit and behaviour. Invariably there was the same reluctance to go out of doors, the abandonment of job, family and friends, a dislike of daylight, a gradual loss of weight and retreat into a hibernating self. As the illness became more widespread, affecting one in a hundred of the population, blame seemed to lie with the depletion of the ozone layer that had continued apace during the 1980s and 1990s. Perhaps the symptoms of world-shyness and withdrawal were no more than a self-protective response to the hazards of ultraviolet radiation, the psychological equivalent of the sunglasses worn by the blind.

But always there was the exaggerated response to sunlight, the erratic migraines and smarting corneas that hinted at the nervous origins of the malaise. There was the taste for wayward and compulsive hobbies, like the marking of obsessional words in a novel, the construction of pointless arithmetical puzzles on a pocket calculator, the collecting of fragments of TV programmes on a video recorder, and the hours spent playing back particular facial grimaces or shots of staircases.

It was another symptom of the 'space sickness', appearing in its terminal

stages, that gave both its popular name and the first real clue to the disease. Almost without exception, the victims became convinced that they had once been astronauts. Thousands of the sufferers lay in their darkened hospital wards, or in the seedy bedrooms of back-street hotels, unaware of the world around them but certain that they had once travelled through space to Mars and Venus, walked beside Armstrong on the Moon. All of them, in their last seconds of consciousness, became calm and serene, and murmured like drowsy passengers at the start of a new voyage, their journey home to the sun.

Sheppard could remember Elaine's final retreat, and his last visit to the white-walled clinic beside the St Lawrence River. They had met only once in the two years since the divorce, and he had not been prepared for the transformation of this attractive and self-possessed dentist into a dreaming adolescent being dressed for her first dance. Elaine smiled brightly at him from her anonymous cot, a white hand trying to draw him on to her pillow.

'Roger, we're going soon. We're leaving together . . .'

As he walked away through the shadowy wards, listening to the babble of voices, the fragments of half-forgotten space jargon picked up from a hundred television serials, he had felt that the entire human race was beginning its embarkation, preparing to repatriate itself to the sun.

Sheppard recalled his last conversation with the young director of the clinic, and the weary physician's gesture of irritation, less with Sheppard than with himself and his profession.

'A *radical* approach? I assume you're thinking of something like resurrection?' Seeing the suspicious tic that jumped across Sheppard's cheek, Martinsen had taken him by the arm in a show of sympathy. 'I'm sorry – she was a remarkable woman. We talked for many hours, about you, much of the time . . .' His small face, as intense as an undernourished child's, was broken by a bleak smile.

Before Sheppard left the clinic the young physician showed him the photographs he had taken of Elaine sitting in a deck-chair on the staff lawn earlier that summer. The first hint of radiant good humour was already on her vivid lips, as if this saucy dentist had been quietly tasting her own laughing gas. Martinsen had clearly been most impressed by her.

But was he on the wrong track, like the whole of the medical profession? The ECT treatments and sensory deprivation, the partial lobotomies and hallucinatory drugs all seemed to miss the point. It was always best to take the mad on their own terms. What Elaine and the other victims were trying to do was to explore space, using their illness as an extreme metaphor with which to construct a space vehicle. The astronaut obsession was the key. It was curious how close the whole malaise was to the withdrawal symptoms shown by the original astronauts in the decades after the Apollo programme, the retreat into mysticism and silence. Could it be that travelling into outer space, even thinking about and watching it on television, was a forced evolutionary step with unforeseen consequences,

the eating of a very special kind of forbidden fruit? Perhaps, for the central nervous system, space was not a linear structure at all, but a model for an advanced condition of time, a metaphor for eternity which they were wrong to try to grasp . . .

Looking back, Sheppard realized that for years he had been waiting for the first symptoms of the malaise to affect him, that he was all too eager to be inducted into the great voyage towards the sun. During the months before the divorce he had carefully observed the characteristic signs – the loss of weight and appetite, his cavalier neglect of both staff and clients at his architect's practice, his growing reluctance to go out of doors, the allergic skin rashes that sprang up if he stood for even a few seconds in the open sunlight. He tagged along on Elaine's expeditions to Algonquin Park, and spent the entire weekends sealed inside the chromium womb of the Airstream, itself so like an astronaut's capsule.

Was Elaine trying to provoke him? She hated his forced absent-mindedness, his endless playing with bizarre clocks and architectural follies, and above all his interest in pornography. This sinister hobby had sprung out of his peculiar obsession with the surrealists, a school of painters which his entire education and cast of mind had previously closed to him. For some reason he found himself gazing for hours at reproductions of Chirico's Turin, with its empty colonnades and reversed perspectives, its omens of departure. Then there were Magritte's dislocations of time and space, his skies transformed into a series of rectilinear blocks, and Dali's biomorphic anatomies.

These last had led him to his obsession with pornography. Sitting in the darkened bedroom, blinds drawn against the festering sunlight that clung to the balconies of the condominium, he gazed all day at the video-recordings of Elaine at her dressing table and in the bathroom. Endlessly he played back the zooms and close-ups of her squatting on the bidet, drying herself on the edge of the bath, examining with a hopeful frown the geometry of her right breast. The magnified images of this huge hemisphere, its curvatures splayed between Sheppard's fingers, glowed against the walls and ceiling of the bedroom.

Eventually, even the tolerant Elaine had rebelled. 'Roger, what are you doing to yourself – and to me? You've turned this bedroom into a porno-cinema, with me as your star.' She held his face, compressing twenty years of affection into her desperate hands. 'For God's sake, see someone!'

But Sheppard already had. In the event, three months later, it was Elaine who had gone. At about the time that he closed his office and summarily sacked his exhausted staff, she packed her bags and stepped away into the doubtful safety of the bright sunlight.

Soon after, the space trauma recruited another passenger.

Sheppard had last seen her at Martinsen's clinic, but within only six months he received news of her remarkable recovery, no doubt one of those temporary remissions that sometimes freed the terminal cases from

their hospital beds. Martinsen had abandoned his post at the clinic, against the open criticism of his colleagues and allegations of misconduct. He and Elaine had left Canada and moved south to the warm Florida winter, and were now living near the old Space Centre at Cape Kennedy. She was up and about, having miraculously shaken off the deep fugues.

At first Sheppard was sceptical, and guessed that the young neurosurgeon had become obsessed with Elaine and was trying some dangerous and radical treatment in a misguided attempt to save her. He imagined Martinsen abducting Elaine, lifting the drowsy but still beautiful woman from her hospital bed and carrying her out to his car, setting off for the harsh Florida light.

However, Elaine seemed well enough. During this period of apparent recovery she wrote several letters to Sheppard, describing the dark, jewelled beauty of the overgrown forest that surrounded their empty hotel, with its view over the Banana River and the rusting gantries of the abandoned Space Centre. Reading her final letter in the flinty light of the Toronto spring, it seemed to Sheppard that the whole of Florida was transforming itself for Elaine into a vast replica of the cavernous grottoes of Gustave Moreau, a realm of opalized palaces and heraldic animals.

'. . . I wish you could be here, Roger, this forest is filled with a deep marine light, almost as if the dark lagoons that once covered the Florida peninsula have come in from the past and submerged us again. There are strange creatures here that seem to have stepped off the surface of the sun. Looking out over the river this morning, I actually saw a unicorn walking on the water, its hooves shod in gold. Philip has moved my bed to the window, and I sit propped here all day, courting the birds, species I've never seen before that seem to have come from some extraordinary future. I feel sure now that I shall never leave here. Crossing the garden yesterday, I found that I was dressed in light, a sheath of golden scales that fell from my skin on to the glowing grass. The intense sunlight plays strange tricks with time and space. I'm really certain that there's a new kind of time here, flowing in some way from the old Space Centre. Every leaf and flower, even the pen in my hand and these lines I'm writing to you are surrounded by haloes of themselves.

Everything moves very slowly now, it seems to take all day for a bird to cross the sky, it begins as a shabby little sparrow and transforms itself into an extravagant creature as plumed and ribboned as a lyre-bird. I'm glad we came, even though Philip was attacked at the time. Coming here was my last chance, he claims. I remember him saying we should seize the light, not fear it. All the same, I think he's got more than he bargained for, he's very tired, poor boy. He's frightened of my falling asleep, he says that when I dream I try to turn into a bird. I woke up by the window this afternoon and he was holding me down, as if I were about to fly off for ever into the forest.

I wish you were here, dear, it's a world the surrealists might have invented. I keep thinking that I will meet you somewhere . . .

Attached to the letter was a note from Martinsen, telling him that Elaine had died the following day, and that at her request she had been buried in the forest near the Space Centre. The death certificate was counter-signed by the Canadian consul in Miami.

A week later Sheppard closed the Toronto apartment and set off for Cape Kennedy. During the past year he had waited impatiently for the malaise to affect him, ready to make his challenge. Like everyone else he rarely went out during the day, but through the window blinds the sight of this empty, sunlit city which came alive only at dusk drove Sheppard into all kinds of restless activity. He would go out into the noon glare and wander among the deserted office blocks, striking stylized poses in the silent curtain-walling. A few heavily cowled policemen and taxi-drivers watched him like spectres on a furnace floor. But Sheppard liked to play with his own obsessions. On impulse he would run around the apartment and release the blinds, turning the rooms into a series of white cubes, so many machines for creating a new kind of time and space.

Thinking of all that Elaine had said in her last letter, and determined as yet not to grieve for her, he set off eagerly on his journey south. Too excited to drive himself, and wary of the steeper sunlight, he moved by bus, rented limousine and taxi. Elaine had always been an accurate observer, and he was convinced that once he reached Florida he would soon rescue her from Martinsen and find respite for them both in the eternal quiet of the emerald forest.

In fact, he found only a shabby, derelict world of dust, drained swimming pools and silence. With the end of the Space Age thirty years earlier, the coastal towns near Cape Kennedy had been abandoned to the encroaching forest. Titusville, Cocoa Beach and the old launching grounds now constituted a psychic disaster area, a zone of ill omen. Lines of deserted bars and motels sat in the heat, their signs like rusty toys. Beside the handsome houses once owned by flight controllers and astrophysicists the empty swimming pools were a resting-place for dead insects and cracked sunglasses.

Shielded by the coat over his head, Sheppard paid off the uneasy cab driver. As he fumbled with his wallet the unlatched suitcase burst at his feet, exposing its contents to the driver's quizzical gaze: a framed reproduction of Magritte's *The March of Summer*, a portable video-cassette projector, two tins of soup, a well-thumbed set of six *Kamera Klassic* magazines, a clutch of cassettes labelled *Elaine/Shower Stall I–XXV*, and a paperback selection of Marey's *Chronograms*.

The driver nodded pensively. 'Samples? Exactly what is all that – a survival kit?'

'Of a special kind.' Unaware of any irony in the man's voice, Sheppard

explained: 'They're the fusing device for a time-machine. I'll make one up for you . . .'

'Too late. My son . . .' With a half-smile, the driver wound up his tinted windows and set off for Tampa in a cloud of glassy dust.

Picking the Starlight Motel at random, Sheppard let himself into an intact cabin overlooking the drained pool, the only guest apart from the elderly retriever that dozed on the office steps. He sealed the blinds and spent the next two days resting in the darkness on the musty bed, the suitcase beside him, this 'survival kit' that would help him to find Elaine.

At dusk on the second day he left the bed and went to the window for his first careful look at Cocoa Beach. Through the plastic blinds he watched the shadows bisecting the empty pool, drawing a broken diagonal across the canted floor. He remembered his few words to the cab driver. The complex geometry of this three-dimensional sundial seemed to contain the operating codes of a primitive time-machine, repeated a hundred times in all the drained swimming pools of Cape Kennedy.

Surrounding the motel was the shabby coastal town, its derelict bars and stores shielded from the sub-tropical dusk by the flamingo-tinted parasols of the palm trees that sprang through the cracked roads and sidewalks. Beyond Cocoa Beach was the Space Centre, its rusting gantries like old wounds in the sky. Staring at them through the sandy glass, Sheppard was aware for the first time of the curious delusion that he had once been an astronaut, lying on his contour couch atop the huge booster, dressed in a suit of silver foil . . . An absurd idea, but the memory had come from somewhere. For all its fearfulness, the Space Centre was a magnetic zone.

But where was the visionary world which Elaine had described, filled with jewelled birds? The old golden retriever sleeping under the diving board would never walk the Banana River on golden hooves.

Although he rarely left the cabin during the day – the Florida sunlight was still far too strong for him to attempt a head-on confrontation – Sheppard forced himself to put together the elements of an organized life. First, he began to take more care of his own body. His weight had been falling for years, part of a long decline that he had never tried to reverse. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, he stared at his unsavoury reflection – his wasted shoulders, sallow arms and inert hands, but a fanatic's face, unshaven skin stretched across the bony points of his jaw and cheeks, orbits like the entrances to forgotten tunnels from which gleamed two penetrating lights. Everyone carried an image of himself that was ten years out of date, but Sheppard felt that he was growing older and younger at the same time – his past and future selves had arranged a mysterious rendezvous in this motel bedroom.

Still, he forced down the cold soup. He needed to be strong enough to drive a car, map the forests and runways of Cape Kennedy, perhaps hire a light aircraft and carry out an aerial survey of the Space Centre.

At dusk, when the sky seemed to tilt and, thankfully, tipped its freight of cyclamen clouds into the Gulf of Mexico, Sheppard left the motel and foraged for food in the abandoned stores and supermarkets of Cocoa Beach. A few of the older townspeople lived on in the overgrown side-streets, and one bar was still open to the infrequent visitors. Derelicts slept in the rusting cars, and the occasional tramp wandered like a schizophrenic Crusoe among the wild palms and tamarinds. Long-retired engineers from the Space Centre, they hovered in their shabby whites by the deserted stores, forever hesitating to cross the shadowy streets.

As he carried a battery charger from an untended appliance store, Sheppard almost bumped into a former mission controller who had frequently appeared on television during the campaign to prevent the disbandment of NASA. With his dulled face, eyes crossed by the memories of forgotten trajectories, he resembled one of Chirico's mannequins, heads marked with mathematical formulae.

'No . . .' He wavered away, and grimaced at Sheppard, the wild fracture lines in his face forming the algebra of an unrealizable future. 'Another time . . . seventeen seconds . . .' He tottered off into the dusk, tapping the palm trees with one hand, preoccupied with this private countdown.

For the most part they kept to themselves, twilight guests of the abandoned motels where no rent would ever be charged and no memories ever be repaid. All of them avoided the government aid centre by the bus depot. This unit, staffed by a psychologist from Miami University and two graduate students, distributed food parcels and medicines to the aged townspeople asleep on their rotting porches. It was also their task to round up the itinerant derelicts and persuade them to enter the state-run hospice in Tampa.

On his third evening, as he looted the local supermarket, Sheppard became aware of this alert young psychologist watching him over the dusty windshield of her jeep.

'Do you need any help breaking the law?' She came over and peered into Sheppard's carton. 'I'm Anne Godwin, hello. Avocado purée, rice pudding, anchovies, you're all set for a midnight feast. But what about a filet steak, you really look as if you could use one?'

Sheppard tried to sidestep out of her way. 'Nothing to worry about. I'm here on a working vacation . . . a scientific project.'

She eyed him shrewdly. 'Just another summer visitor – though you all have PhDs, the remittance men of the Space Age. Where are you staying? We'll drive you back.'

As Sheppard struggled with the heavy carton she signalled to the graduate students, who strolled across the shadowy pavement. At that moment a rusty Chevrolet turned into the street, a bearded man in a soft hat at the wheel. Blocked by the jeep, he stopped to reverse the heavy sedan, and Sheppard recognized the young physician he had last seen on the steps of the clinic overlooking the St Lawrence.

'Dr Martinsen!' Anne Godwin shouted as she released Sheppard's arm.

'I've been wanting to talk to you, doctor. Wait . . . ! That prescription you gave me, I take it you've reached the menopause –'

Punching the locked gear shift, Martinsen seemed only interested in avoiding Anne Godwin and her questions. Then he saw Sheppard's alert eyes staring at him above the carton. He paused, and gazed back at Sheppard, with the frank and almost impatient expression of an old friend who had long since come to terms with an act of treachery. He had grown his beard, as if to hide some disease of the mouth or jaw, but his face seemed almost adolescent and at the same time aged by some strange fever.

'Doctor . . . I've reported –' Anne Godwin reached Martinsen's car. He made a half-hearted attempt to hide a loosely tied bundle of brass curtain-rods on the seat beside him. Was he planning to hang the forest with priceless fabrics? Before Sheppard could ask, Martinsen engaged his gear lever and sped off, clipping Anne Godwin's outstretched hand with his wing-mirror.

But at least he knew now that Martinsen was here, and their brief meeting allowed Sheppard to slip away unobserved from Anne Godwin. Followed by the doddery retriever, Sheppard carried his stores back to the motel, and the two of them enjoyed a tasty snack in the darkness beside the drained swimming pool.

Already he felt stronger, confident that he would soon have tracked down Martinsen and rescued Elaine. For the next week he slept during the mornings and spent the afternoons repairing the old Plymouth he had commandeered from a local garage.

As he guessed, Martinsen soon put in another appearance. A small, bird-shaped kite began a series of regular flights in the sky above Cocoa Beach. Its silver line disappeared into the forest somewhere to the north of the town. Two others followed it into the air, and the trio swayed across the placid sky, flown by some enthusiast in the forest.

In the days that followed, other bird-emblems began to appear in the streets of Cocoa Beach, crude Picasso doves chalked on the boarded store-fronts, on the dusty roofs of the cars, in the leafy slime on the drained floor of the Starlight pool, all of them presumably cryptic messages from Martinsen.

So the neurosurgeon was trying to lure him into the forest? Finally giving in to his curiosity, Sheppard drove late one afternoon to the light airfield at Titusville. Little traffic visited the shabby airstrip, and a retired commercial pilot dozed in his dusty office below a sign advertising pleasure trips around the Cape.

After a brief haggle, Sheppard rented a single-engined Cessna and took off into the softening dusk. He carried out a careful reconnaissance of the old Space Centre, and at last saw the strange nightclub in the forest, and caught a painful glimpse of the weird, bald-headed spectre racing through the trees. Then Martinsen sprang his surprise with the man-powered glider, clearly intending to ambush Sheppard and force him to crash-land

the Cessna into the jungle. However, Sheppard escaped, and limped back to Cocoa Beach and the incoming tide. Anne Godwin virtually dragged him from the swamped plane, but he managed to pacify her and slip away to the motel.

That evening he rested in his chair beside the empty pool, watching the video-cassettes of his wife projected on to the wall at the deep end. Somewhere in these intimate conjunctions of flesh and geometry, of memory, tenderness and desire, was a key to the vivid air, to that new time and space which the first astronauts had unwittingly revealed here at Cape Kennedy, and which he himself had glimpsed that evening from the cockpit of the drowned aircraft.

At dawn Sheppard fell asleep, only to be woken two hours later by a sudden shift of light in the darkened bedroom. A miniature eclipse of the sun was taking place. The light flickered, trembling against the window. Lying on the bed, Sheppard saw the profile of a woman's face and plumed hair projected on to the plastic blinds.

Bracing himself against the eager morning sunlight, and any unpleasant phobic rush, Sheppard eased the blinds apart. Two hundred feet away, suspended above the chairs on the far side of the swimming pool, a large man-carrying kite hung in the air. The painted figure of a winged woman was silhouetted against the sun's disc, arms outstretched across the canvas panels. Her shadow tapped the plastic blinds, only inches from Sheppard's fingers, as if asking to be let into the safety of the darkened bedroom.

Was Martinsen offering him a lift in this giant kite? Eyes shielded behind his heaviest sunglasses, Sheppard left the cabin and made his way around the drained pool. It was time now to make a modest challenge to the sun. The kite hung above him, flapping faintly, its silver wire disappearing behind a boat-house half a mile along the beach.

Confident of himself, Sheppard set off along the beach road. During the night the Cessna had vanished, swept away by the sea. Behind the boat-house the kite-flier was winding in his huge craft, and the woman's shadow kept Sheppard company, the feathered train of her hair at his feet. Already he was sure that he would find Martinsen among the derelict speedboats, ravelling in whatever ambiguous message he had sent up into the fierce air.

Almost tripping over the woman's shadow, Sheppard paused to gaze around him. After so many weeks and months of avoiding the daylight, he felt uncertain of the overlit perspectives, of the sea lapping at the edges of his mind, its tongues flicking across the beach like some treacherous animal's. Ignoring it, he ran along the road. The kite-flier had vanished, slipping away into the palm-filled streets.

Sheppard threw away his sunglasses and looked up into the air. He was surprised that the sky was far closer to him than he remembered. It seemed almost vertical, constructed of cubicular blocks a mile in width, the wall of an immense inverted pyramid.

The waves pressed themselves into the wet sand at his feet, flattering courtiers in this palace of light. The beach seemed to tilt, the road reversed its camber. He stopped to steady himself against the roof of an abandoned car. His retinas smarted, stung by thousands of needles. A feverish glitter rose from the roofs of the bars and motels, from the rusty neon signs and the flinty dust at his feet, as if the whole landscape was at the point of ignition.

The boat-house swayed towards him, its roof tilting from side to side. Its cavernous doors opened abruptly, like the walls of an empty mountain. Sheppard stepped back, for a moment blinded by the darkness, as the figure of a winged man burst from the shadows and raced past him across the sand towards the safety of the nearby forest. Sheppard saw a bearded face under the feathered head-dress, canvas wings on a wooden frame attached to the man's arms. Waving them up and down like an eccentric aviator, he sprinted between the trees, hindered more than helped by his clumsy wings, one of which sheared from his shoulder when he trapped himself among the palms. He vanished into the forest, still leaping up and down in an attempt to gain the air with his one wing.

Too surprised to laugh at Martinsen, Sheppard ran after him. He followed the line of metal thread that unravelled behind the neurosurgeon. The man-carrying kite had collapsed across the roof of a nearby drugstore, but Sheppard ignored it and ran on through the narrow streets. The line came to an end under the rear wheel of an abandoned truck, but he had already lost Martinsen.

On all sides were the bird-signs, chalked up on the fences and tree-trunks, hundreds of them forming a threatening aviary, as if Martinsen was trying to intimidate the original tenants of the forest and drive them away from the Cape. Sheppard sat on the running-board of the truck, holding the broken end of the kite-line between his fingers.

Why was Martinsen wearing his ludicrous wings, trying to turn himself into a bird? At the end of the road he had even constructed a crude bird-trap, large enough to take a condor or a small winged man, a cage the size of a garden shed tilted back on a trip-balance of bamboo sticks.

Shielding his eyes from the glare, Sheppard climbed on to the bonnet of the truck and took his bearings. He had entered an unfamiliar part of Cocoa Beach, a maze of roads invaded by the forest. He was well within that zone of vibrant light he had seen from the Cessna, the dim lantern that seemed to extend outwards from the Space Centre, illuminating everything it touched. The light was deeper but more resonant, as if every leaf and flower were a window into a furnace.

Facing him, along the line of shabby bars and stores, was a curious laundromat. Sandwiched between a boarded-up appliance store and a derelict cafeteria, it resembled a miniature temple, with a roof of gilded tiles, chromium doors and windows of finely etched glass. The whole structure was suffused with a deep interior light, like some lamp-lit grotto in a street of shrines.

The same bizarre architecture was repeated in the nearby roads that lost themselves in the forest. A dry-goods store, a filling station and a car-wash glittered in the sunlight, apparently designed for some group of visiting space enthusiasts from Bangkok or Las Vegas. Overgrown by the tamarinds and Spanish moss, the gilded turrets and metalled windows formed a jewelled suburb in the forest.

Giving up his search for Martinsen, who by now could be hiding atop one of the Apollo gantries, Sheppard decided to return to his motel. He felt exhausted, as if his body were swathed in a heavy armour. He entered the pavilion beside the cafeteria, smiling at the extravagant interior of this modest laundromat. The washing machines sat within bowers of ironwork and gilded glass, a series of side-chapels set aside for the worship of the space engineers' overalls and denims.

A ruby light glimmered around Sheppard, as if the pavilion were vibrating above a mild ground-quake. Sheppard touched the glassy wall with one hand, surprised to find that his palm seemed to merge with the surface, as if both were images being projected on to a screen. His fingers trembled, a hundred outlines superimposed upon one another. His feet drummed against the floor, sending the same rapid eddies through his legs and hips, as if he were being transformed into a holographic image, an infinity of replicas of himself. In the mirror above the cashier's metal desk, now a Byzantine throne, he glowed like an archangel. He picked up a glass paperweight from the desk, a tremulous jewel of vibrating coral that suddenly flushed within its own red sea. The ruby light that radiated from every surface within the laundromat was charged by his own bloodstream as it merged into the flicker of multiplying images.

Staring at his translucent hands, Sheppard left the pavilion and set off along the street through the intense sunlight. Beyond the tilting fences he could see the drained swimming pools of Cocoa Beach, each a complex geometry of light and shadow, canted decks encoding the secret entrances to another dimension. He had entered a city of yantras, cosmic dials sunk into the earth outside each house and motel for the benefit of devout time-travellers.

The streets were deserted, but behind him he heard a familiar laboured pad. The old retriever plodded along the sidewalk, its coat shedding a tremulous golden fur. Sheppard stared at it, for a moment certain that he was seeing the unicorn Elaine had described in her last letter. He looked down at his wrists, at his incandescent fingers. The sun was annealing plates of copper light to his skin, dressing his arms and shoulders in a coronation armour. Time was condensing around him, a thousand replicas of himself from the past and future had invaded the present and clasped themselves to him.

Wings of light hung from his shoulders, feathered into a golden plumage drawn from the sun, the reborn ghosts of his once and future selves, conscripted to join him here in the streets of Cocoa Beach.

Startled by Sheppard, an old woman stared at him from the door of a

shack beside the boat-house. Brittle hands felt her blue-rinsed hair, she found herself transformed from a shabby crone into a powdered beauty from the forgotten Versailles of her youth, her thousand younger selves from every day of her life gladly recruited to her side, flushing her withered cheeks and warming her stick-like hands. Her elderly husband gazed at her from his rocker chair, recognizing her for the first time in decades, himself transformed into a conquistador half-asleep beside a magical sea.

Sheppard waved to them, and to the tramps and derelicts emerging into the sunlight from their cabins and motel rooms, drowsy angels each awaking to his own youth. The flow of light through the air had begun to slow, layers of time overlaid each other, laminae of past and future fused together. Soon the tide of photons would be still, space and time would set forever.

Eager to become part of this magnetic world, Sheppard raised his wings and turned to face the sun.

'Were you trying to fly?'

Sheppard sat against the wall beside his bed, arms held tight like crippled wings around his knees. Near by in the darkened bedroom were the familiar pieces of furniture, the Marey and Magritte reproductions pinned to the dressing-table mirror, the projector ready to screen its black coil of film on to the wall above his head.

Yet the room seemed strange, a cabin allocated to him aboard a mysterious liner, with this concerned young psychologist sitting at the foot of the bed. He remembered her jeep in the dusty road, the loudhailer blaring at the elderly couple and the other derelicts as they were all about to rise into the air, a flight of angels. Suddenly a humdrum world had returned, his past and future selves had fled from him, he found himself standing in a street of shabby bars and shacks, a scarecrow with an old dog. Stunned, the tramps and the old couple had pinched their dry cheeks and faded back to their dark bedrooms.

So this was present time. Without realizing it, he had spent all his life in this grey, teased-out zone. However, he still held the paperweight in his hand. Though inert now, raised to the light it began to glow again, summoning its brief past and limitless future to its own side.

Sheppard smiled at himself, remembering the translucent wings – an illusion, of course, a blur of multiple selves that shimmered from his arms and shoulders, like an immense electric plumage. But perhaps at some time in the future he became a winged man, a glass bird ready to be snared by Martinsen? He saw himself caged in the condor-traps, dreaming of the sun . . .

Anne Godwin was shaking her head to herself. She had turned from Sheppard and was examining with evident distaste the pornographic photographs pinned to the wardrobe doors. The glossy prints were overlaid by geometric diagrams which this strange tenant of the motel had pencilled across the copulating women, a secondary anatomy.

'So this is your laboratory? We've been watching you for days. Who are you, anyway?'

Sheppard looked up from his wrists, remembering the golden fluid that had coursed through the now sombre veins.

'Roger Sheppard.' On an impulse he added: 'I'm an astronaut.'

'Really?' Like a concerned nurse, she sat on the edge of the bed, tempted to touch Sheppard's forehead. 'It's surprising how many of you come to Cape Kennedy – bearing in mind that the space programme ended thirty years ago.'

'It hasn't ended.' Quietly, Sheppard did his best to correct this attractive but confused young woman. He wanted her to leave, but already he saw that she might be useful. Besides, he was keen to help her, and set her free from this grey world. 'In fact, there are thousands of people involved in a new programme – we're at the beginnings of the first true Space Age.'

'Not the second? So the Apollo flights were . . . ?'

'Misconceived.' Sheppard gestured at the Marey chronograms on the dressing-table mirror, the blurred time-lapse photos so like the images he had seen of himself before Anne Godwin's arrival. 'Space exploration is a branch of applied geometry, with many affinities to pornography.'

'That sounds sinister.' She gave a small shudder. 'These photographs of yours look like the recipe for a special kind of madness. You shouldn't go out during the day. Sunlight inflames the eyes – and the mind.'

Sheppard pressed his face against the cool wall, wondering how to get rid of this over-concerned young psychologist. His eyes ran along the sills of light between the plastic blinds. He no longer feared the sun, and was eager to get away from this dark room. His real self belonged to the bright world outside. Sitting here, he felt like a static image in a single frame hanging from the coil of film in the projector on the bedside table. There was a sense of stop-frame about the whole of his past life – his childhood and schooldays, McGill and Cambridge, the junior partnership in Vancouver, his courtship of Elaine, together seemed like so many clips run at the wrong speed. The dreams and ambitions of everyday life, the small hopes and failures, were attempts to bring these separated elements into a single whole again. Emotions were the stress lines in this over-stretched web of events.

'Are you all right? Poor man, can't you breathe?'

Sheppard became aware of Anne Godwin's hand on his shoulder. He had clenched his fingers so tightly around the paperweight that his fist was white. He relaxed his grip and showed her the glassy flower.

Casually, he said: 'There's some curious architecture here – filling stations and laundromats like Siamese temples. Have you seen them?'

She avoided his gaze. 'Yes, to the north of Cocoa Beach. But I keep away from there.' She added reluctantly: 'There's a strange light by the Space Centre, one doesn't know whether to believe one's eyes.' She weighed the flower in her small hand, the fingers still bruised by Martinsen's wing-mirror. 'That's where you found this? It's like a fossil of the future.'

'It is.' Sheppard reached out and took it back. He needed the security of the piece, it reminded him of the luminous world from which this young woman had disturbed him. Perhaps she would join him there? He looked up at her strong forehead and high-bridged nose, a cut-prow that could outstare the time-winds, and at her broad shoulders, strong enough to bear a gilded plumage. He felt a sudden urge to examine her, star her in a new video film, explore the planes of her body like a pilot touching the ailerons and fuselage of an unfamiliar aircraft.

He stood up and stepped to the wardrobe. Without thinking, he began to compare the naked figure of his wife with the anatomy of the young woman sitting on his bed, the contours of her breasts and thighs, the triangles of her neck and pubis.

'Look, do you mind?' She stood between Sheppard and the photographs. 'I'm not going to be annexed into this experiment of yours. Anyway, the police are coming to search for that aircraft. Now, what is all this?'

'I'm sorry.' Sheppard caught himself. Modestly, he pointed to the elements of his 'kit', the film strips, chronograms and pornographic photos, the Magritte reproduction. 'It's a machine, of a kind. A time-machine. It's powered by that empty swimming pool outside. I'm trying to construct a metaphor to bring my wife back to life.'

'Your wife – when did she die?'

'Three months ago. But she's here, in the forest, somewhere near the Space Centre. That was her doctor you saw the other evening, he's trying to turn into a bird.' Before Anne Godwin could protest Sheppard took her arm and beckoned her to the door of the cabin. 'Come on, I'll show you how the pool works. Don't worry, you'll be outside for only ten minutes – we've all been too frightened of the sun.'

She held his elbow when they reached the edge of the empty pool, her face beginning to fret in the harsh light. The floor of the pool was strewn with leaves and discarded sunglasses, in which the diagram of a bird was clearly visible.

Sheppard breathed freely in the gold-lit air. There were no kites in the sky, but to the north of Cocoa Beach he could see the man-powered aircraft circling the forest, its flimsy wings floating on the thermals. He climbed down the chromium ladder into the shallow end of the pool, then helped the nervous young woman after him.

'This is the key to it all,' he explained, as she watched him intently, eyes shielded from the terrifying glare. He felt almost light-headed as he gestured proudly at the angular geometry of white tile and shadow. 'It's an engine, Anne, of a unique type. It's no coincidence that the Space Centre is surrounded by empty swimming pools.' Aware of a sudden intimacy with this young psychologist, and certain that she would not report him to the police, he decided to take her into his confidence. As they walked down the inclined floor to the deep end he held her shoulders. Below their feet cracked the black lenses of dozens of discarded sunglasses, some of the thousands thrown into

the drained swimming pools of Cocoa Beach like coins into a Roman fountain.

'Anne, there's a door out of this pool, I'm trying to find it, a side-door for all of us to escape through. This space sickness – it's really about time, not space, like all the Apollo flights. We think of it as a kind of madness, but in fact it may be part of a contingency plan laid down millions of years ago, a real space programme, a chance to escape into a world beyond time. Thirty years ago we opened a door in the universe . . .'

He was sitting on the floor of the drained pool among the broken sunglasses, his back to the high wall of the deep end, talking rapidly to himself as Anne Godwin ran up the sloping floor for the medical valise in her jeep. In his white hands he held the glass paperweight, his blood and the sun charging the flower into a red blaze.

Later, as he rested with her in his bedroom at the motel, and during their days together in the coming week, Sheppard explained to her his attempt to rescue his wife, to find a key to everything going on around them.

'Anne, throw away your watch. Fling back the blinds. Think of the universe as a simultaneous structure. Everything that's ever happened, all the events that *will* ever happen, are taking place together. We can die, and yet still live, at the same time. Our sense of our own identity, the stream of things going on around us, are a kind of optical illusion. Our eyes are too close together. Those strange temples in the forest, the marvellous birds and animals – you've seen them too. We've all got to embrace the sun, I want your children to live here, and Elaine . . .'

'Roger –' Anne moved his hands from her left breast. For minutes, as he spoke, Sheppard had been obsessively feeling its curvatures, like a thief trying to crack a safe. She stared at the naked body of this obsessive man, the white skin alternating at the elbows and neck with areas of black sunburn, a geometry of light and shade as ambiguous as that of the drained swimming pool.

'Roger, she died three months ago. You showed me a copy of the death certificate.'

'Yes, she died,' Sheppard agreed. 'But only in a sense. She's here, somewhere, in the total time. No one who has ever lived can ever really die. I'm going to find her, I know she's waiting here for me to bring her back to life . . .' He gestured modestly to the photographs around the bedroom. 'It may not look much, but this is a metaphor that's going to work.'

During that week, Anne Godwin did her best to help Sheppard construct his 'machine'. All day she submitted to the Polaroid camera, to the films of her body which Sheppard projected on to the wall above the bed, to the endless pornographic positions in which she arranged her thighs and pubis. Sheppard gazed for hours through his stop-frame focus, as if he would find among these images an anatomical door, one of the keys in a combination whose other tumblers were the Marey chronograms, the

surrealist paintings and the drained swimming pool in the ever-brighter sunlight outside. In the evenings Sheppard would take her out into the dusk and pose her beside the empty pool, naked from the waist, a dream-woman in a Delvaux landscape.

Meanwhile, Sheppard's duel with Martinsen continued in the skies above Cape Kennedy. After a storm the drowned Cessna was washed up on to the beach, sections of the wing and tailplane, parts of the cabin and undercarriage. The reappearance of the aircraft drove both men into a frenzy of activity. The bird motifs multiplied around the streets of Cocoa Beach, aerosolled on to the flaking storefronts. The outlines of giant birds covered the beach, their talons gripping the fragments of the Cessna.

And all the while the light continued to grow brighter, radiating outwards from the gantries of the Space Centre, inflaming the trees and flowers and paving the dusty sidewalks with a carpet of diamonds. For Anne, this sinister halo that lay over Cocoa Beach seemed to try to sear itself into her retinas. Nervous of windows, she submitted herself to Sheppard during these last days. It was only when he tried to suffocate her, in a confused attempt to release her past and future selves from their prison, that she escaped from the motel and set off for the sheriff at Titusville.

As the siren of the police car faded through the forest, Sheppard rested against the steering wheel of the Plymouth. He had reached the old NASA causeway across the Banana River, barely in time to turn off on to a disused slip road. He unclenched his fists, uneasily aware that his hands still stung from his struggle with Anne Godwin. If only he had been given more time to warn the young woman that he was trying to help her, to free her from that transient, time-locked flesh he had caressed so affectionately.

Restarting the engine, Sheppard drove along the slip road, already an uneven jungle path. Here on Merrit Island, almost within the sweeping shadows of the great gantries, the forest seemed ablaze with light, a submarine world in which each leaf and branch hung weightlessly around him. Relics of the first Space Age emerged from the undergrowth like overlit ghosts – a spherical fuel tank stitched into a jacket of flowering lianas, rocket launchers collapsed at the feet of derelict gantries, an immense tracked vehicle six storeys high like an iron hotel, whose unwound treads formed two notched metal roads through the forest.

Six hundred yards ahead, when the path petered out below a collapsed palisade of palm trunks, Sheppard switched off the engine and stepped from the car. Now that he was well within the perimeter of the Space Centre he found that the process of time-fusion was even more advanced. The rotting palms lay beside him, but alive again, the rich scrolls of their bark bright with the jade years of youth, glowing with the copper hues of their forest maturity, elegant in the grey marquetry of their declining age.

Through a break in the canopy Sheppard saw the Apollo 12 gantry

rising through the high oaks like the blade of a giant sundial. Its shadow lay across a silver inlet of the Banana River. Remembering his flight in the Cessna, Sheppard estimated that the nightclub was little more than a mile to the north-west. He set off on foot through the forest, stepping from one log to the next, avoiding the curtains of Spanish moss that hung out their beguiling frescoes. He crossed a small glade beside a shallow stream, where a large alligator basked contentedly in a glow of self-generated light, smiling to itself as its golden jaws nuzzled its past and future selves. Vivid ferns sprang from the damp humus, ornate leaves stamped from foil, layer upon layer of copper and verdigris annealed together. Even the modest ground-ivy seemed to have glutted itself on the corpses of long-vanished astronauts. This was a world nourished by time.

Bird-signs marked the trees, Picasso doves scrawled on every trunk as if some over-worked removal manager was preparing the entire forest for flight. There were huge traps, set out in the narrow clearings and clearly designed to snare a prey other than birds. Standing by one of the trip-balanced hutches, Sheppard noticed that they all pointed towards the Apollo gantries. So Martinsen was now frightened, not of Sheppard, but of some aerial creature about to emerge from the heart of the Space Centre.

Sheppard tossed a loose branch on to the sensitive balance of the trap. There was a flicker of sprung bamboo, and the heavy hutch fell to the ground in a cloud of leaves, sending a glimmer of light reverberating among the trees. Almost at once there was a flurry of activity from a copse of glowing palmettos a hundred yards away. As Sheppard waited, hidden behind the trap, a running figure approached, a bearded man in a ragged bird costume, half-Crusoe, half-Indian brave, bright macaw feathers tied to his wrists and an aviator's goggles on his forehead.

He raced up to the trap and stared at it in a distraught way. Relieved to find it empty, he brushed the tattered feathers from his eyes and peered at the canopy overhead, as if expecting to see his quarry perched on a nearby branch.

'Elaine . . . !'

Martinsen's cry was a pathetic moan. Unsure how to calm the neurosurgeon, Sheppard stood up.

'Elaine isn't here, doctor –'

Martinsen flinched back, his bearded face as small as a child's. He stared at Sheppard, barely managing to control himself. His eyes roved across the glowing ground and foliage, and he flicked nervously at the blurred edges of his fingers, clearly terrified of these ghosts of his other selves now clinging to him. He gestured warningly to Sheppard, pointing to the multiple outlines of his arms and legs that formed a glowing armour.

'Sheppard, keep moving. I heard a noise – have you seen Elaine?'

'She's dead, doctor.'

'Even the dead can dream!' Martinsen nodded to Sheppard, his body

shaking as if with fever. He pointed to the bird-traps. 'She dreams of flying. I've put these here, to catch her if she tries to escape.'

'Doctor . . .' Sheppard approached the exhausted physician. 'Let her fly, if she wants to, let her dream. And let her *wake* . . .'

'Sheppard!' Martinsen stepped back, appalled by Sheppard's electric hand raised towards him. 'She's trying to come back from the dead!'

Before Sheppard could reach him, the neurosurgeon turned away. He smoothed his feathers and darted through the palms, and with a hoot of pain and anger disappeared into the forest.

Sheppard let him go. He knew now why Martinsen had flown his kites, and filled the forest with the images of birds. He had been preparing the whole of the Space Centre for Elaine, transforming the jungle into an aviary where she might be at home. Terrified by the sight of this apparently winged woman waking from her deathbed, he hoped that somehow he could keep her within the magical realm of the Cape Kennedy forest.

Leaving the traps, Sheppard set off through the trees, his eyes fixed on the great gantries now only a few hundred yards away. He could feel the time-winds playing on his skin, annealing his other selves on to his arms and shoulders, the transformation of himself once again into that angelic being who strode through the shabby streets of Cocoa Beach. He crossed a concrete runway and entered an area of deeper forest, an emerald world furnished with extravagant frescoes, a palace without walls.

He had almost ceased to breathe. Here, at the centre of the space grounds, he could feel time rapidly engorging itself. The infinite pasts and future of the forest had fused together. A long-tailed parakeet paused among the branches over his head, an electric emblem of itself more magnificent than a peacock. A jewelled snake hung from a bough, gathering to it all the embroidered skins it had once shed.

An inlet of the Banana River slid through the trees, a silver tongue lying passively at his feet. On the bank fifty yards away was the nightclub he had seen from the Cessna, its luminous façade glowing against the foliage.

Sheppard hesitated by the water's edge, and then stepped on to its hard surface. He felt the brittle corrugations under his feet, as if he were walking across a floor of frosted glass. Without time, nothing could disturb the water. On the quartz-like grass below the nightclub a flock of orioles had begun to rise from the ground. They hung silently in the air, their golden fans lit by the sun.

Sheppard stepped ashore and walked up the slope towards them. A giant butterfly spread its harlequin wings against the air, halted in midflight. Avoiding it, Sheppard strode towards the entrance to the nightclub, where the man-powered glider sat on the grass, its propeller a bright sword. An unfamiliar bird crouched on the canopy, a rare species of quetzal or toucan, only recently a modest starling. It stared at its prey, a small lizard sitting on the steps, now a confident iguana armoured within all its selves. Like everything in the forest, both had become ornamental creatures drained of malice.

Through the crystal doors Sheppard peered into the glowing bower of the nightclub. Already he could see that this exotic pavilion had once been no more than a park-keeper's lodge, some bird-watcher's weekend hide transformed by the light of its gathering identities into this miniature casino. The magic casements revealed a small but opulent chamber, a circle of well-upholstered electric chairs beside a kitchen like the side-chapel of a chromium cathedral. Along the rear wall was a set of disused cages left here years earlier by a local ornithologist.

Sheppard unlatched the doors and stepped into the airless interior. A musty and unpleasant odour hung around him, not the spoor of birds but of some unclaimed carcass stored too long in the sun.

Behind the kitchen, and partly hidden in the shadows thrown by the heavy curtains, was a large cage of polished brass rods. It stood on a narrow platform, with a velvet drape across one end, as if some distracted conjuror had been about to perform an elaborate trick involving his assistant and a flock of doves.

Sheppard crossed the chamber, careful not to touch the glowing chairs. The cage enclosed a narrow hospital cot, its side-panels raised and tightly bolted. Lying on its bare mattress was an elderly woman in a bathrobe. She stared with weak eyes at the bars above her face, hair hidden inside a white towel wrapped securely around her forehead. One arthritic hand had seized the pillow, so that her chin jutted forward like a chisel. Her mouth was open in a dead gape, an ugly rictus that exposed her surprisingly even teeth.

Looking down at the waxy skin of this once familiar face, a part of his life for so many years, Sheppard at first thought that he was looking at the corpse of his mother. But as he pulled back the velvet drape the sunlight touched the porcelain caps of her teeth.

'Elaine . . .'

Already he accepted that she was dead, that he had come too late to this makeshift mausoleum where the grieving Martinsen had kept her body, locking it into this cage while he tried to draw Sheppard into the forest.

He reached through the bars and touched her forehead. His nervous hand dislodged the towel, exposing her bald scalp. But before he could replace the grey skull-cloth he felt something seize his wrist. Her right hand, a clutch of knobbly sticks from which all feeling had long expired, moved and took his own. Her weak eyes stared calmly at Sheppard, recognizing this young husband without any surprise. Her blanched lips moved across her teeth, testing the polished cusps, as if she were cautiously identifying herself.

'Elaine . . . . I've come. I'll take you –' Trying to warm her hand, Sheppard felt an enormous sense of relief, knowing that all the pain and uncertainty of the past months, his search for the secret door, had been worthwhile. He felt a race of affection for his wife, a need to give way to all the stored emotions he had been unable to express since her death. There were a thousand and one things to tell her, about his plans

for the future, his uneven health and, above all, his long quest for her across the drained swimming pools of Cape Kennedy.

He could see the glider outside, the strange bird that guarded the now glowing cockpit, a halo in which they could fly away together. He fumbled with the door to the cage, confused by the almost funereal glimmer that had begun to emanate from Elaine's body. But as she stirred and touched her face, a warm light suffused her grey skin. Her face was softening, the bony points of her forehead retreated into the smooth temples, her mouth lost its death-grimace and became the bright bow of the young student he had first seen twenty years ago, smiling at him across the tennis club pool. She was a child again, her parched body flushed and irrigated by her previous selves, a lively schoolgirl animated by the images of her past and future.

She sat up, strong fingers releasing the death-cap around her head, and shook loose the damp tresses of silver hair. She reached her hands towards Sheppard, trying to embrace her husband through the bars. Already her arms and shoulders were sheathed in light, that electric plumage which he now wore himself, winged lover of this winged woman.

As he unlocked the cage, Sheppard saw the pavilion doors open to the sun. Martinsen stood in the entrance, staring at the bright air with the toneless expression of a sleepwalker woken from a dark dream. He had shed his feathers, and his body was now dressed in a dozen glimmering images of himself, refractions of past and present seen through the prism of time.

He gestured to Sheppard, trying to warn him away from his wife. Sheppard was certain now that the physician had been given a glimpse into the dream-time, as he mourned Elaine in the hours after her death. He had seen her come alive from the dead, as the images of her past and youth came to her rescue, drawn here by the unseen powers of the Space Centre. He feared the open cage, and the spectre of this winged woman rising from her dreams at the grave's edge, summoning the legion of her past selves to resurrect her.

Confident that Martinsen would soon understand, Sheppard embraced his wife and lifted her from the bed, eager to let this young woman escape into the sunlight.

Could all this have been waiting for them, around the unseen corners of their past lives? Sheppard stood by the pavilion, looking out at the silent world. An almost tangible amber sea lay over the sandbars of Cape Kennedy and Merrit Island. Hung from the Apollo gantries, a canopy of diamond air stretched across the forest.

There was a glimmer of movement from the river below. A young woman ran along the surface of the water, her silver hair flowing behind her like half-furled wings. Elaine was learning to fly. The light from her outstretched arms glowed on the water and dappled the leaves of the

passing trees. She waved to Sheppard, beckoning him to join her, a child who was both his mother and his daughter.

Sheppard walked towards the water. He moved through the flock of orioles suspended above the grass. Each of the stationary birds had become a congested jewel dazzled by its own reflection. He took one of the birds from the air and smoothed its plumage, searching for that same key he had tried to find when he caressed Anne Godwin. He felt the fluttering aviary in his hands, a feathered universe that trembled around a single heart.

The bird shuddered and came to life, like a flower released from its capsules. It sprang from his fingers, a rush of images of itself between the branches. Glad to set it free, Sheppard lifted the orioles down from the air and caressed them one by one. He released the giant butterfly, the quetzal and the iguana, the moths and insects, the frozen, time-locked ferns and palmettos by the water's edge.

Last of all, he released Martinsen. He embraced the helpless doctor, searching for the strong sinews of the young student and the wise bones of the elderly physician. In a sudden moment of recognition, Martinsen found himself, his youth and his age merged in the open geometries of his face, this happy rendezvous of his past and future selves. He stepped back from Sheppard, hands raised in a generous salute, then ran across the grass towards the river, eager to see Elaine.

Content now, Sheppard set off to join them. Soon the forest would be alive again, and they could return to Cocoa Beach, to that motel where Anne Godwin lay in the darkened bedroom. From there they would move on, to the towns and cities of the south, to the sleepwalking children in the parks, to the dreaming mothers and fathers embalmed in their homes, waiting to be woken from the present into the infinite realm of their time-filled selves.

1982

REPORT ON AN UNIDENTIFIED SPACE STATION

Survey Report 1

By good luck we have been able to make an emergency landing on this uninhabited space station. There have been no casualties. We all count ourselves fortunate to have found safe haven at a moment when the expedition was clearly set on disaster.

The station carries no identification markings and is too small to appear on our charts. Although of elderly construction it is soundly designed and in good working order, and seems to have been used in recent times as a transit depot for travellers resting at mid-point in their journeys. Its interior consists of a series of open passenger concourses, with comfortably equipped lounges and waiting rooms. As yet we have not been able to locate the bridge or control centre. We assume that the station was one of many satellite drogues surrounding a larger command unit, and was abandoned when a decline in traffic left it surplus to the needs of the parent transit system.

A curious feature of the station is its powerful gravitational field, far stronger than would be suggested by its small mass. However, this probably represents a faulty reading by our instruments. We hope shortly to complete our repairs and are grateful to have found shelter on this relic of the now forgotten migrations of the past.

Estimated diameter of the station: 500 metres.

Survey Report 2

Our repairs are taking longer than we first estimated. Certain pieces of equipment will have to be entirely rebuilt, and to shorten this task we are carrying out a search of our temporary home.

To our surprise we find that the station is far larger than we guessed. A thin local atmosphere surrounds the station, composed of interstellar dust attracted by its unusually high gravity. This fine vapour obscured the substantial bulk of the station and led us to assume that it was no more than a few hundred metres in diameter.

We began by setting out across the central passenger concourse that separates the two hemispheres of the station. This wide deck is furnished with thousands of tables and chairs. But on reaching the high partition doors 200 metres away we discovered that the restaurant deck is only a modest annexe to a far larger concourse. An immense roof three storeys high extends across an open expanse of lounges and promenades.

We explored several of the imposing staircases, each equipped with a substantial mezzanine, and found that they lead to identical concourses above and below.

The space station has clearly been used as a vast transit facility, comfortably accommodating many thousands of passengers. There are no crew quarters or crowd control posts. The absence of even a single cabin indicates that this army of passengers spent only a brief time here before being moved on, and must have been remarkably self-disciplined or under powerful restraint.

Estimated diameter: 1 mile.

Survey Report 3

A period of growing confusion. Two of our number set out 48 hours ago to explore the lower decks of the station, and have so far failed to return. We have carried out an extensive search and fear that a tragic accident has taken place. None of the hundreds of elevators is in working order, but our companions may have entered an unanchored cabin and fallen to their deaths. We managed to force open one of the heavy doors and gazed with awe down the immense shaft. Many of the elevators within the station could comfortably carry a thousand passengers. We hurled several pieces of furniture down the shaft, hoping to time the interval before their impact, but not a sound returned to us. Our voices echoed away into a bottomless pit.

Perhaps our companions are marooned far from us on the lower levels? Given the likely size of the station, the hope remains that a maintenance staff occupies the crew quarters on some remote upper deck, unaware of our presence here.

Estimated diameter: 10 miles.

Survey Report 4

Once again our estimate of the station's size has been substantially revised. The station clearly has the dimensions of a large asteroid or even a small planet. Our instruments indicate that there are thousands of decks, each extending for miles across an undifferentiated terrain of passenger concourses, lounges and restaurant terraces. As before there is no sign of any crew or supervisory staff. Yet somehow a vast passenger complement was moved through this planetary waiting room.

While resting in the armchairs beneath the unvarying light we have all noticed how our sense of direction soon vanishes. Each of us sits at a point in space that at the same time seems to have no precise location but could be anywhere within these endless vistas of tables and armchairs. We can only assume that the passengers moving along these decks possessed some instinctive homing device, a mental model of the station that allowed them to make their way within it.

In order to establish the exact dimensions of the station and, if possible, rescue our companions we have decided to abandon our repair

work and set out on an unlimited survey, however far this may take us.

Estimated diameter: 500 miles.

Survey Report 5

No trace of our companions. The silent interior spaces of the station have begun to affect our sense of time. We have been travelling in a straight line across one of the central decks for what seems an unaccountable period. The same pedestrian concourses, the same mezzanines attached to the stairways, and the same passenger lounges stretch for miles under an unchanging light. The energy needed to maintain this degree of illumination suggests that the operators of the station are used to a full passenger complement. However, there are unmistakable signs that no one has been here since the remote past.

We press on, following the same aisle that separates two adjacent lounge concourses. We rest briefly at fixed intervals, but despite our steady passage we sense that we are not moving at all, and may well be trapped within a small waiting room whose apparently infinite dimensions we circle like ants on a sphere. Paradoxically, our instruments confirm that we are penetrating a structure of rapidly increasing mass.

Is the entire universe no more than an infinitely vast space terminal?

Estimated diameter: 5000 miles.

Survey Report 6

We have just made a remarkable discovery! Our instruments have detected that a slight but perceptible curvature is built into the floors of the station. The ceilings recede behind us and dip fractionally towards the decks below, while the disappearing floors form a distinct horizon.

So the station is a curvilinear structure of finite form! There must be meridians that mark out its contours, and an equator that will return us to our original starting point. We all feel an immediate surge of hope. Already we may have stumbled on an equatorial line, and despite the huge length of our journey we may in fact be going home.

Estimated diameter: 50,000 miles.

Survey Report 7

Our hopes have proved to be short-lived. Excited by the thought that we had mastered the station, and cast a net around its invisible bulk, we were pressing on with renewed confidence. However, we now know that although these curvatures exist, they extend in all directions. Each of the walls curves away from its neighbours, the floors from the ceilings. The station, in fact, is an expanding structure whose size appears to increase exponentially. The longer the journey undertaken by a passenger, the greater the incremental distance he will have to travel. The virtually unlimited facilities of the station suggest that its passengers were embarked on extremely long, if not infinite journeys.

Needless to say, the complex architecture of the station has ominous implications for us. We realise that the size of the station is a measure, not of the number of passengers embarked – though this must have been vast – but of the length of the journeys undertaken within it. Indeed, there should ideally be only one passenger. A solitary voyager embarked on an infinite journey would require an infinity of transit lounges. As there are, fortunately, more than one of us we can assume that the station is a finite structure with the appearance of an infinite one. The degree to which it approaches an infinite size is merely a measure of the will and ambition of its passengers.

Estimated diameter: 1 million miles.

Survey Report 8

Just when our spirits were at their lowest ebb we have made a small but significant finding. We were moving across one of the limitless passenger decks, a prey to all fears and speculations, when we noticed the signs of recent habitation. A party of travellers has passed here in the recent past. The chairs in the central concourse have been disturbed, an elevator door has been forced, and there are the unmistakable traces left by weary voyagers. Without doubt there were more than two of them, so we must regretfully exclude our lost companions.

But there are others in the station, perhaps embarked on a journey as endless as our own!

We have also noticed slight variations in the decor of the station, in the design of light fittings and floor tiles. These may seem trivial, but multiplying them by the virtually infinite size of the station we can envisage a gradual evolution in its architecture. Somewhere in the station there may well be populated enclaves, even entire cities, surrounded by empty passenger decks that stretch on forever like free space. Perhaps there are nation-states whose civilisations rose and declined as their peoples paused in their endless migrations across the station.

What force propelled them on their meaningless journeys? We can only hope that they were driven forward by the greatest of all instincts, the need to establish the station's size.

Estimated diameter: 5 light years.

Survey Report 9

We are jubilant! A growing euphoria has come over us as we move across these great concourses. We have seen no further trace of our fellow passengers, and it now seems likely that we were following one of the inbuilt curvatures of the station and had crossed our own tracks.

But this small setback counts for nothing now. We have accepted the limitless size of the station, and this awareness fills us with feelings that are almost religious. Our instruments confirm what we have long suspected, that the empty space across which we travelled from our own solar system in fact lies within the interior of the station, one of the many

vast lacunae set in its endlessly curving walls. Our solar system and its planets, the millions of other solar systems that constitute our galaxy, and the island universes themselves all lie within the boundaries of the station. The station is coeval with the cosmos, and constitutes the cosmos. Our duty is to travel across it on a journey whose departure point we have already begun to forget, and whose destination is the station itself, every floor and concourse within it.

So we move on, sustained by our faith in the station, aware that every step we take thereby allows us to reach a small part of that destination. By its existence the station sustains us, and gives our lives their only meaning. We are glad that in return we have begun to worship the station.

Estimated diameter: 15 million light years.

1982

THE OBJECT OF THE ATTACK

From the Forensic Diaries of Dr Richard Greville,
Chief Psychiatric Adviser, Home Office

7 June 1987. An unsettling week – two Select Committees; the failure of mother's suspect Palmer to reach its reserve at Sotheby's (I suggested that they might re-attribute it to Keating, which doubly offended them); and wearying arguments with Sarah about our endlessly postponed divorce and her over-reliance on ECT – she is strongly for the former, I as strongly against the latter . . . I suspect that her patients are suffering for me.

But, above all, there was my visit to The Boy. Confusing, ugly and yet strangely inspiring. Inviting me to Daventry, Governor Henson referred to him, as does everyone else in the Home Office, as 'the boy', but I feel he has now earned the capital letters. Years of being moved about, from Rampton to Broadmoor to the Home Office Special Custody Unit at Daventry, the brutal treatment and solitary confinement have failed to subdue him.

He stood in the shower stall of the punishment wing, wearing full canvas restraint suit, and plainly driven mad by the harsh light reflected from the white tiles, which were streaked with blood from a leaking contusion on his forehead. He has been punched about a great deal, and flinched from me as I approached, but I felt that he almost invited physical attack as a means of provoking himself. He is far smaller than I expected, and looks only seventeen or eighteen (though he is now twenty-nine), but is still strong and dangerous – President Reagan and Her Majesty were probably lucky to escape.

Case notes: missing caps to both canines, contact dermatitis of the scalp, a left-handed intention tremor, and signs of an hysterical photophobia. He appeared to be gasping with fear, and Governor Henson tried to reassure him, but I assume that far from being afraid he felt nothing but contempt for us and was deliberately hyperventilating. He was chanting what sounded like 'Allahu akbar', the expulsive God-is-Great cry used by the whirling dervishes to induce their hallucinations, the same over-oxygenation of the brain brought on, in milder form, by church hymns and community singing at Cup Finals.

The Boy certainly resembles a religious fanatic – perhaps he is a Shi'ite Muslim convert? He only paused to stare at the distant aerials of Daventry visible through a skylight. When a warder closed the door he began to whimper and pump his lungs again. I asked the orderly to clean the wound

on his forehead, but as I helped with the dressing he lunged forward and knocked my briefcase to the floor. For a few seconds he tried to provoke an assault, but then caught sight of the Sotheby's catalogue among my spilled papers, and the reproduction of mother's Samuel Palmer. That serene light over the visionary meadows, the boughs of the oaks like windows of stained glass in the cathedral of heaven, together appeared to calm him. He gazed at me in an uncanny way, bowing as if he assumed that I was the painter.

Later, in the Governor's office, we came to the real purpose of my visit. The months of disruptive behaviour have exhausted everyone, but above all they are terrified of an escape, and a second attack on HMQ. Nor would it help the Atlantic Alliance if the US President were assassinated by a former inmate of a British mental hospital. Henson and the resident medical staff, with the encouragement of the Home Office, are keen to switch from chlorpromazine to the new NX series of central nervous system depressants – a spin-off of Porton Down's work on nerve gases. Prolonged use would induce blurred vision and locomotor ataxia, but also suppress all cortical function, effectively lobotomising him. I thought of my wrangles with Sarah over ECT – psychiatry cannot wait to return to its dark ages – and tactfully vetoed the use of NX until I had studied the medical history in the Special Branch dossier. But I was thinking of The Boy's eyes as he gazed on that dubious Palmer.

The Assassination Attempt

In 1982, during the state visit of President Reagan to the United Kingdom, an unsuccessful aerial attack was made upon the royal family and their guest at Windsor Castle. Soon after the President and Mrs Reagan arrived by helicopter, a miniature glider was observed flying across the Home Park in a north-westerly direction. The craft, a primitive hang-glider, was soaring at a height of some 120 feet, on a course that would have carried it over the walls of the Castle. However, before the Special Branch and Secret Service marksmen could fire upon the glider it became entangled in the aerials above the royal mausoleum at Frogmore House and fell to the ground beside the Long Walk.

Strapped to the chest of the unconscious pilot was an explosive harness containing twenty-four sticks of commercial gelignite linked to NCB detonators, and a modified parachute ripcord that served as a hand-operated triggering device. The pilot was taken into custody, and no word of this presumed assassination attempt was released to the public or to the Presidential party. HMQ alone was informed, which may explain Her Majesty's impatience with the President when, on horseback, he paused to exchange banter with a large group of journalists.

The pilot was never charged or brought to trial, but detained under the mental health acts in the Home Office observation unit at Springfield Hospital. He was a twenty-four-year-old former video-games programmer and failed Jesuit novice named Matthew Young. For the past eight months

he had been living in a lock-up garage behind a disused Baptist church in Highbury, north London, where he had constructed his flying machine. Squadron Leader D.H. Walsh of the RAF Museum, Hendon, identified the craft as an exact replica of a glider designed by the 19th-century aviation pioneer Otto Lilienthal. Later research showed that the glider was the craft in which Lilienthal met his death in 1896. Fellow-residents in the lock-up garages, former girlfriends of the would-be assassin and his probation officer all witnessed his contruction of the glider during the spring of 1982. However, how he launched this antique machine – the nearest high ground is the Heathrow control tower five miles to the east – or remained airborne for his flight across the Home Park, is a mystery to this day.

Later, in the interview cell, The Boy sat safely handcuffed between his two warders. The bruised and hyperventilating figure had been replaced by a docile youth resembling a reformed skinhead who had miraculously seen the light. Only the eerie smile which he turned upon me so obligingly reminded me of the glider and the harness packed with explosive. As always, he refused to answer any questions put to him, and we sat in a silence broken only by his whispered refrain.

Ignoring these cryptic mutterings, I studied a list of those present at Windsor Castle.

President Reagan, HM The Queen, Mrs Reagan, Prince Philip, Prince Charles, Princess Diana . . .

The US Ambassador, Dr Billy Graham, Apollo astronaut Colonel Tom Stamford, Mr Henry Ford III, Mr James Stewart, the presidents of Heinz, IBM and Lockheed Aircraft, and assorted Congressmen, military and naval attachés, State Department and CIA pro-consuls . . .

Lord Delfont, Mr Andrew Lloyd Webber, Miss Joanna Lumley . . .

In front of Young, on the table between us, I laid out the photographs of President Reagan, the Queen, Prince Philip, Charles and Diana. He showed not a flicker of response, leaned forward and with his scarred chin nudged the Sotheby's catalogue from my open briefcase. He held the Palmer reproduction to his left shoulder, obliquely smiling his thanks. Sly and disingenuous, he was almost implying that I was his accomplice. I remembered how very manipulative such psychopaths could be – Myra Hindley, Brady and Mary Bell had convinced various naïve and well-meaning souls of their 'religious conversions'.

Without thinking, I drew the last photograph from the dossier: Colonel Stamford in his white space-suit floating free above a space-craft during an orbital flight.

The chanting stopped. I heard Young's heels strike the metal legs of his chair as he drew back involuntarily. A focal seizure of the right hand rattled his handcuffs. He stared at the photograph, but the gaze of his eyes was

far beyond the cell around us, and I suspected that he was experiencing a warning aura before an epileptic attack. With a clear shout to us all, he stiffened in his chair and slipped to the floor in a *grand mal.*

As his head hammered the warders' feet I realised that he had been chanting, not 'Allahu akbar', but 'Astro-naut' . . .

Astro-nought . . . ?

Matthew Young: the Personal History of a Psychopath

So, what is known of The Boy? The Special Branch investigators assembled a substantial dossier on this deranged young man.

Born 1958, Abu Dhabi, father manager of Amoco desalination plant. Childhood in the Gulf area, Alaska and Aberdeen. Educational misfit, with suspected *petit mal* epilepsy, but attended Strathclyde University for two terms in 1975, computer sciences course. Joined Worker's Revolutionary Party 1976, arrested outside US Embassy, London, during anti-nuclear demonstration. Worked as scaffolder and painter, Jodrell Bank Radio-Observatory, 1977; prosecuted for malicious damage to reflector dish. Jesuit novice, St Francis Xavier seminary, Dundalk, 1978; expelled after three weeks for sexual misconduct with mother of fellow novice. Fined for being drunk and disorderly during 'Sculpture of the Space Age' exhibition at Serpentine Gallery, London. Video-games programmer, Virgin Records, 1980. Operated pirate radio station attempting to jam transmissions from Space Shuttle, prosecuted by British Telecom. Registered private patents on video-games 'Target Apollo' and 'Shuttle Attack', 1981. Numerous convictions for assault, possession of narcotics, dangerous driving, unemployment benefit frauds, disturbances of the peace. 1982, privately published his 'Cosmological Testament', a Blakean farrago of nature mysticism, apocalyptic fantasy and pseudo-mathematical proofs of the nonexistence of space-time . . .

All in all, a classic delinquent, with that history of messianic delusions and social maladjustment found in regicides throughout history. The choice of Mr Reagan reflects the persistent appeal of the theme of presidential assassination, which seems to play on the edgy dreams of so many lonely psychopaths. Invested in the President of the United States, the world's most powerful leader, are not only the full office and authority of the temporal world, but the very notion of existence itself, of the continuum of time and space which encloses the assassin as much as his victim. Like the disturbed child seeking to destroy everything in its nursery, the assassin is trying to obliterate those images of himself which he identifies with his perception of the external universe. Suicide would leave the rest of existence intact, and it is the notion of existence, incarnated in the person of the President, that is the assassin's true target.

The Dream of Death by Air

'. . . in the Second Fall, their attempt to escape from their home planet, the peoples of the earth invite their planetary death, choosing the zero

gravity of a false space and time, recapitulating in their weightlessness the agony of the First Fall of Man . . .'

COSMOLOGICAL TESTAMENT, BOOK I

The Dream of Death by Water

'. . . the sea is an exposed cerebral cortex, the epidermis of a sleeping giant whom the Apollo and Skylab astronauts will awake with their splashdowns. All the peoples of the planet will walk, fly, entrain for the nearest beach, they will ride rapids, endure hardships, abandon continents until they at last stand together on the terminal shore of the world, then step forward . . .'

COSMOLOGICAL TESTAMENT, BOOK III

The Dream of Death by Earth

'. . . the most sinister and dangerous realms are those devised by man during his inward colonising of his planet, applying the dreams of a degenerate outer space to his inner world – warrens, dungeons, fortifications, bunkers, oubliettes, underground garages, tunnels of every kind that riddle his mind like maggots through the brains of a corpse . . .'

COSMOLOGICAL TESTAMENT, BOOK VII

A curious volume, certainly, but no hint of a dream of death by fire – and no suggestion of Reagan, nor of Her Majesty, Princess Diana, Mrs Thatcher . . . ?

The Escape Engine: the Ames Room

14 October 1987. The Boy has escaped! An urgent call this morning from Governor Henson. I flew up to Daventry immediately in the crowded Home Office helicopter. Matthew Young has vanished, in what must be one of the most ingenious escape attempts ever devised. The Governor and his staff were in a disoriented state when I arrived. Henson paced around his office, pressing his hands against the bookshelves and re-arranging the furniture, as if not trusting its existence. Home Office and Special Branch people were everywhere, but I managed to calm Henson and piece together the story.

Since my previous visit they had relaxed Young's regime. Mysteriously, the Samuel Palmer illustration in Sotheby's catalogue had somehow calmed him. He no longer defaced his cell walls, volunteered to steamhose them, and had pinned the Palmer above his bunk, gazing at it as if it were a religious icon. (If only it were a Keating – the old rogue would have been delighted. As it happens, Keating's reputation as a faker may have given Young his plan for escape.)

Young declined to enter the exercise yard – the high British Telecom aerials clearly unsettled him – so Henson arranged for him to use the prison chapel as a recreation room. Here the trouble began, as became clear when the Governor showed me into the chapel, a former private

cinema furnished with pews, altar, pulpit, etc. For reasons of security, the doors were kept locked, and the warders on duty kept their eyes on Young by glancing through the camera slit in the projection room. As a result, the warders saw the interior of the chapel from one perspective only. Young had cunningly taken advantage of this, re-arranging the pews, pulpit and altar table to construct what in effect was an Ames Room – Adelbert Ames Jr, the American psychologist, devised a series of trick rooms, which seemed entirely normal when viewed through a peephole, but were in fact filled with unrelated fragments of furniture and ornaments.

Young's version of the Ames Room was far more elaborate. The cross and brass candelabra appeared to stand on the altar table, but actually hung in mid-air ten feet away, suspended from the ceiling on lengths of cotton teased from his overalls. The pews had been raised on piers of prayer books and Bibles to create the illusion of an orderly nave. But once we left the projection room and entered the chapel we saw that the pews formed a stepped ramp that climbed to the ventilation grille behind the altar table. The warders glancing through the camera slit in the projection room had seen Young apparently on his knees before the cross, when in fact he had been sitting on the topmost pew in the ramp, loosening the bolts around the metal grille.

Henson was appalled by Young's escape, but I was impressed by the cleverness of this optical illusion. Like Henson, the Home Office inspectors were certain that another assassination attempt might be made on Her Majesty. However, as we gazed at that bizarre chapel something convinced me that the Queen and the President were not in danger. On the shabby wall behind the altar Young had pinned a dozen illustrations of the American and Russian space programmes, taken from newspapers and popular magazines. All the photographs of the astronauts had been defaced, the Skylab and Shuttle craft marked with obscene graffiti. He had constructed a Black Chapel, which at the same time was a complex escape device that would set him free, not merely from Daventry, but from the threat posed by the astronauts and from that far larger prison whose walls are those of space itself.

The Astro-Messiah

Colonel Thomas Jefferson Stamford, USAF (ret.). Born 1931, Brigham City, Utah. Eagle scout, 1945. B.S. (Physics), Caltech, 1953. Graduated US Air Force Academy, 1957. Served Vietnam, 1964–9. Enrolled NASA 1970; deputy ground controller, Skylab III. 1974, rumoured commander of secret Apollo 20 mission to the Moon which landed remote-controlled nuclear missile station in the Mare Imbrium. Retired 1975, appointed vice-president, Pepsi-Cola Corporation. 1976, script consultant to 20th Century-Fox for projected biopic *Men with Fins.*

1977, associated with the Precious Light Movement, a California-based consciousness-raising group calling for legalisation of LSD. Resigned 1978,

hospitalised Veterans Administration Hospital, Fresno. On discharge begins nine months retreat at Truth Mountain, Idaho, interdenominational order of lay monks. 1979, founds Spaceways, drug rehabilitation centre, Santa Monica. 1980–1, associated with Billy Graham, shares platform on revivalist missions to Europe and Australia. 1982, visits Windsor Castle with President Reagan. 1983, forms the evangelical trust COME Incorporated, tours Alabama and Mississippi as self-proclaimed 13th Disciple. 1984, visits Africa, SE Asia, intercedes Iraq/Iran conflict, addresses Nato Council of Ministers, urges development of laser weapons and neutron bomb. 1986, guest of Royal Family at Buckingham Palace, appears in Queen's Christmas TV broadcast, successfully treats Prince William, becomes confidant and spiritual adviser to Princess Diana. Named Man of the Year by *Time Magazine*, profiled by *Newsweek* as 'Space-Age Messiah' and 'founder of first space-based religion'.

Could this much-admired former astronaut, a folk hero who clearly fulfilled the role of a 1980s Lindbergh, have been the real target of the Windsor attack? Lindbergh had once hob-nobbed with kings and chancellors, but his cranky political beliefs had become tainted by pro-Nazi sentiments. By contrast Col. Stamford's populist mix of born-again Christianity and anti-communist rhetoric seemed little more than an outsider's long shot at the White House. Now and then, watching Stamford's rallies on television, I detected the same hypertonic facial musculature that could be seen in Hitler, Gaddafi and the more excitable of Khomeini's mullahs, yet nothing worthy of the elaborate assassination attempt, a psychodrama in itself, that Matthew Young had mounted in his Lilienthal glider.

And yet . . . who better than a pioneer aeronaut to kill a pioneer astronaut, to turn the clock of space exploration back to zero?

10 February 1988. For the last three months an energetic search has failed to find any trace of Matthew Young. The Special Branch guard on the Queen, Prime Minister and senior cabinet members has been tightened, and several of the royals have been issued with small pistols. One hopes that they will avoid injuring themselves, or each other. Already the disguised fashion-accessory holster worn by Princess Diana has inspired a substantial copycat industry, and London is filled with young women wearing stylised codpieces (none of them realise why), like cast members from a musical version of *The Gunfight at the OK Corral.*

The Boy's former girlfriends and surviving relatives, his probation officer and fellow programmers at Virgin Records have been watched and/or interrogated. A few suspected sightings have occurred: in November an eccentric young man in the leather gaiters and antique costume of a World War I aviator enrolled for a course of lessons at Elstree Flying School, only to suffer an epileptic seizure after the first take-off. Hundreds of London Underground posters advertising Col. Stamford's Easter rally at Earls Court have been systematically defaced. At Pinewood Studios an arsonist

has partially destroyed the sets for the $100 million budget science-fiction films *The Revenge of R2D2* and *C3PO Meets E.T.* A night intruder penetrated the offices of COME Inc. in the Tottenham Court Road and secretly dubbed an obscene message over Col. Stamford's inspirational address on the thousands of promotional videos. In several Piccadilly amusement arcades the Space Invaders games have been reprogrammed to present Col. Stamford's face as the target.

More significant, perhaps, a caller with the same voiceprint as Matthew Young has persistently tried to telephone the Archbishop of Canterbury. Three days ago the vergers at Westminster Abbey briefly apprehended a youth praying before a bizarre tableau consisting of Col. Stamford's blood-stained space-suit and helmet, stolen from their display case in the Science Museum, which he had set up in a niche behind the High Altar. The rare blood group, BRh, is not Col. Stamford's but The Boy's.

The reports of Matthew Young at prayer reminded me of Governor Henson's description of the prisoner seen on his knees in that illusionist chapel he had constructed at Daventry. There is an eerie contrast between the vast revivalist rally being televised at this moment from the Parc des Princes in Paris, dominated by the spotlit figure of the former astronaut, and the darkened nave of the Abbey where an escaped mental patient prayed over a stolen space-suit smeared with his own blood. The image of outer space, from which Col. Stamford draws so much of his religious inspiration, for Matthew Young seems identified with some unspecified evil, with the worship of a false messiah. His prayers in the Daventry chapel, as he knelt before the illusion of an altar, were a series of postural codes, a contortionist's attempt to free himself from Col. Stamford's sinister embrace.

I read once again the testimony collected by the Special Branch:

Margaret Downs, systems analyst, Wang Computers: 'He was always praying, forever on his confounded knees. He even made me take a video of him, and studied it for hours. It was just too much . . .'

Doreen Jessel, health gym instructress: 'At first I thought he was heavily into anaerobics. Some kind of dynamic meditation, he called it, all acrobatic contortions. I tried to get him to see a physiotherapist . . .'

John Hatton, probation officer: 'There was a therapeutic aspect, of which he convinced me against my better judgement. The contortions seemed to mimic his epilepsy . . .'

Reverend Morgan Evans, Samaritans: 'He accepted Robert Graves's notion of the club-footed messiah – that peculiar stepped gait common to various forms of religious dance and to all myths involving the Achilles tendon. He told me that it was based on the crabbed moon-walk adopted by the astronauts to cope with zero gravity . . .'

Sergeant J. Mellors, RAF Regiment: 'The position was that of a kneeling marksman required to get off a series of shots with a bolt-action rifle, such as the Lee-Enfield or the Mannlicher-Carcano. I banned him from the firing range . . .'

Was Matthew Young dismantling and reassembling the elements of his own mind as if they were the constituents of an Ames Room? The pilot of the Home Office helicopter spoke graphically of the spatial disorientation felt by some of the special category prisoners being moved on the Daventry shuttle, in particular the cries and contortions of a Palestinian hijacker who imagined he was a dying astronaut. Defects of the vestibular apparatus of the ear are commonly found in hijackers (as in some shamans), the same sense of spatial disorientation that can be induced in astronauts by the high-speed turntable or the zero gravity of orbital flights.

It may be, therefore, that defects of the vestibular apparatus draw their sufferers towards high-speed aircraft, and the hijack is an unconscious attempt to cure this organic affliction. Prayer, vestibular defects, hijacking – watching Col. Stamford in the Parc des Princes, I notice that he sometimes stumbles as he bows over his lectern, his hands clasped in prayer in that characteristic spasm so familiar from the newsreels and now even mimicked by TV comedians.

Is Col. Stamford trying to hijack the world?

28 March 1988. Events are moving on apace. Colonel Thomas Jefferson Stamford has arrived in London, after completing his triumphal tour of the non-communist world. He has conferred with generals and right-wing churchmen, and calmed battlefields from the Golan Heights to the western Sahara. As always, he urges the combatants to join forces against the real enemy, pushing an anti-Soviet, church-militant line that makes the CIA look like the Red Cross. Television and newspapers show him mingling with heads of state and retired premiers, with Kohl, Thatcher and Mitterrand, with Scandinavian royals and the British monarch.

Throughout, Col. Stamford's earlier career as an astronaut is never forgotten. At his rallies in the Parc des Princes and Munich's Olympic Stadium these great arenas are transformed into what seems to be the interior of a gigantic star-ship. By the cunning use of a circular film screen, Col. Stamford's arrival at the podium is presented as a landing from outer space, to deafening extracts from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and Holst's *Planets*. With its illusionist back-projection and trick lighting the rally becomes a huge Ames Room, a potent mix of evangelical Christianity, astronautics and cybernetic movie-making. We are in the presence of an Intelsat messiah, a mana-personality for the age of cable TV.

His thousands of followers sway in their seats, clutching COME Inc.'s promotional videos like Mao's Red Guards with their little red books. Are we seeing the first video religion, an extravagant light show with laser graphics by Lucasfilms? The message of the rallies, as of the videos, is that Col. Thomas Stamford has returned to earth to lead a moral crusade against atheistic Marxism, a Second Coming that has launched the 13th Disciple down the aisles of space from the altar of the Mare Imbrium.

Already two former Apollo astronauts have joined this crusade, resigning their directorships of Avis and Disney Corporation, and members

of the Skylab and Shuttle missions have pledged their support. Will NASA one day evolve into a religious organisation? Caucus leaders in the Democratic and Republican Parties have urged Col. Stamford to stand for President. But I suspect that the Great Mission Controller in the Sky intends to bypass the Presidency and appeal directly to the US public as an astro-messiah, a space ayatollah descending to earth to set up his religious republic.

The First Church of the Divine Astronaut

These messianic strains reminded me of The Boy, the self-sworn enemy of all astronauts. On the day after the Colonel's arrival in London for the Easter rally, to be attended by Prince Charles, Princess Diana and the miraculously cured Prince William, I drove to the lock-up garage in Highbury. I had repeatedly warned the Home Office of a probable assassination attempt, but they seemed too mesmerised by the Stamford fever that had seized the whole of London to believe that anyone would attack him.

As Constable Willings waited in the rain I stared down at the oil-stained camp bed and the sink with its empty cans of instant coffee. The Special Branch investigators had stripped the shabby garage, yet pinned to the cement wall above the bed was a postcard that they had inexplicably missed. Stepping closer, I saw that it was a reproduction of a small Samuel Palmer, 'A Dream of Death by Fire', a visionary scene of the destruction of a false church by the surrounding light of a true nature. The painting had been identified by Keating as one of his most ambitious frauds.

A fake Keating to describe the death of a fake messiah? Pinned to the damp cement within the past few days, the postcard was clearly Matthew Young's invitation to me. But where would I find him? Then, through the open doors, I saw the disused Baptist church behind the row of garages.

As soon as I entered its gloomy nave I was certain that Matthew Young's target had been neither President Reagan nor the Queen. The bolt cutters borrowed from Constable Willings snapped the links of the rusting chain. When he had driven away I pushed back the worm-riddled doors. At some time in the past a television company had used the deconsecrated church to store its unwanted props. Stage sets and painted panels from a discontinued science-fiction series leaned against the walls in a dusty jumble.

I entered the aisle and stood between the pews. Then, as I stepped forward, I saw a sudden diorama of the lunar surface. In front of me was a miniature film set constructed from old *Star Wars* posters and props from *Dr Who*. Above the lunar landscape hung the figure of an astronaut flying with arms outstretched.

As I guessed, this diorama formed part of yet another Ames Room. The astronaut's figure created its illusion only when seen from the doors of the church. As I approached, however, its elements moved apart. A gloved hand hung alone, severed from the arm that seemed to support it. The

detached thorax and sections of the legs drifted away from one another, suspended on threads of wire from the rafters above the nave. The head and helmet had been sliced from the shoulders, and had taken off on a flight of their own. As I stood by the altar the dismembered astronaut flew above me, like a chromium corpse blown apart by a booby-trap hidden in its life-support system.

Lying on the stone floor below this eerie spectacle was Matthew Young. He rested on his back in a scuffle of dust and cracked flagstones, his scarred mouth drawn back in a bloodless grimace to reveal the broken teeth whose caps he had crushed. He had fallen to the floor during his *grand mal* attack, and his outstretched fingers had torn a section of a *Star Wars* poster, which lay across him like a shroud. Blood pooled in a massive haematoma below his cheekbone, as if during the focal seizure of his right hand he had been trying to put out the eye with the telescopic sight of the marksman's rifle that he clasped in his fist.

I freed his tongue and windpipe, massaged his diaphragm until his breath was even, and placed a choir cushion below his shoulders. On the floor beside him were the barrel, receiver, breech and magazine of a stockless rifle whose parts he had been oiling in the moments before his attack, and which I knew he would reassemble the instant he awoke.

Easter Day, 1988. This evening Col. Stamford's rally will be held at Earls Court. Since his arrival in London, as a guest of Buckingham Palace, the former astronaut has been intensely busy, preparing that springboard which will propel him across the Atlantic. Three days ago he addressed the joint Houses of Parliament in Westminster Hall. In his televised speech he called for a crusade against the evil empire of the non-Christian world, for the construction of orbital nuclear bomb platforms, for the launching of geosynchronous laser weapons trained upon Teheran, Moscow and Peking. He seems to be demanding the destruction not merely of the Soviet Union but of the non-Christian world, the re-conquest of Jerusalem and the conversion of Islam.

It is clear that Col. Stamford is as demented as Hitler, but fortunately his last splashdown is at hand. I assume that Matthew Young will be attending the Earls Court rally this evening. I did not report him to the police, confident that he would recover in time to reassemble his rifle and make his way to one of the empty projection booths beneath the roof of the arena. Seeing Col. Stamford's arrival from 'outer space', The Boy will watch him from the camera window, and listen to him urge his nuclear jihad against the forces of the anti-Christ. From that narrow but never more vital perspective, the sights of his rifle, Matthew Young will be ready once again to dismantle an illusionist space and celebrate the enduring mysteries of the Ames Room.

ANSWERS TO A QUESTIONNAIRE

1) Yes.
2) Male (?)
3) c/o Terminal 3, London Airport, Heathrow.
4) Twenty-seven.
5) Unknown.
6) Dr Barnardo's Primary, Kingston-upon-Thames; HM Borstal, Send, Surrey; Brunel University Computer Sciences Department.
7) Floor cleaner, Mecca Amusement Arcades, Leicester Square.
8) If I can avoid it.
9) Systems Analyst, Sperry-Univac, 1979–83.
10) Manchester Crown Court, 1984.
11) Credit card and computer fraud.
12) Guilty.
13) Two years, HM Prison, Parkhurst.
14) Stockhausen, de Kooning, Jack Kerouac.
15) Whenever possible.
16) Twice a day.
17) NSU, Herpes, gonorrhoea.
18) Husbands.
19) My greatest ambition is to turn into a TV programme.
20) I first saw the deceased on 17 February 1986, in the chapel at London Airport. He was praying in the front pew.
21) At the time I was living in an out-of-order cubicle in the air traffic controllers' washroom in Terminal 3.
22) Approx. 5 ft 7 in, aged thirty-three, slim build, albino skin and thin black beard, some kind of crash injuries to both hands. At first I thought he was a Palestinian terrorist.
23) He was wearing the stolen uniform trousers of an El Al flight engineer.
24) With my last money I bought him a prawnburger in the mezzanine cafeteria. He thanked me and, although not carrying a bank-card, extracted £100 from a service till on the main concourse.
25) Already I was convinced that I was in the presence of a messianic figure who would help me to penetrate the Nat West deposit account computer codes.
26) No sexual activity occurred.
27) I took him to Richmond Ice Rink where he immediately performed

six triple salchows. I urged him to take up ice-dancing with an eye to the European Championships and eventual gold at Seoul, but he began to trace out huge double spirals on the ice. I tried to convince him that these did not feature in the compulsory figures, but he told me that the spirals represented a model of synthetic DNA.

28) No.
29) He gave me to understand that he had important connections at the highest levels of government.
30) Suite 17B, London Penta Hotel. I slept on the floor in the bathroom.
31) Service tills in Oxford Street, Knightsbridge and Earls Court.
32) Approx. £275,000 in three weeks.
33) Porno videos. He took a particular interest in Kamera Klimax and Electric Blue.
34) Almost every day.
35) When he was drunk. He claimed that he brought the gift of eternal life.
36) At the Penta Hotel I tried to introduce him to Torvill and Dean. He was interested in meeting only members of the Stock Exchange and Fellows of the Royal Society.
37) Females of all ages.
38) Group sex.
39) Marie Drummond, twenty-two, sales assistant, HMV Records; Denise Attwell, thirty-seven, research supervisor, Geigy Pharmaceuticals; Florence Burgess, fifty-five, deaconess, Bible Society Bookshop; Angelina Gomez, twenty-three, air hostess, Iberian Airways; Phoebe Adams, forty-three, cruise protestor, Camp Orange, Greenham Common.
40) Sometimes, at his suggestion.
41) Unsatisfactory.
42) Premature ejaculation; impotence.
43) He urged me to have a sex-change operation.
44) National Gallery, Wallace Collection, British Museum. He was much intrigued by representations of Jesus, Zoroaster and the Gautama Buddha, and commented on the likenesses.
45) With the permission of the manager, NE District, British Telecom.
46) We erected the antenna on the roof of the Post Office Tower.
47) 2500 KHz.
48) Towards the constellation Orion.
49) I heard his voice, apparently transmitted from the star Betelgeuse 2000 years ago.
50) Interference to TV reception all over London and the South-East.
51) No. 1 in the BARB Ratings, exceeding the combined audiences for Coronation Street, Dallas and Dynasty.
52) Regular visitors included Princess Diana, Prince Charles and Dr Billy Graham.

53) He hired the Wembley Conference Centre.
54) 'Immortality in the Service of Mankind'.
55) Guests were drawn from the worlds of science and politics, the church, armed forces and the Inland Revenue.
56) Generous fees.
57) Service tills in Mayfair and Regent Street.
58) He had a keen appreciation of money, but was not impressed when I told him of Torvill and Dean's earnings.
59) He was obsessed by the nature of the chemical bond.
60) Sitting beside him at the top table were: (1) The Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition, (2) The President of the Royal Society, (3) The Archbishop of Canterbury, (4) The Chief Rabbi, (5) The Chairman of the Diners Club, (6) The Chairman of the Bank of England, (7) The General Secretary of the Inland Revenue Staff Federation, (8) The President of Hertz Rent-a-Car, (9) The President of IBM, (10) The Chief of the General Staff, (11) Dr Henry Kissinger, (12) Myself.
61) He stated that synthetic DNA introduced into the human germ plasm would arrest the process of ageing and extend human life almost indefinitely.
62) Perhaps 1 million years.
63) He announced that Princess Diana was immortal.
64) Astonishment/disbelief.
65) He advised the audience to invest heavily in leisure industries.
66) The value of the pound sterling rose to $8.75.
67) American TV networks, *Time Magazine, Newsweek.*
68) The Second Coming.
69) He expressed strong disappointment at the negative attitude of the Third World.
70) The Kremlin.
71) He wanted me to become the warhead of a cruise missile.
72) My growing disenchantment.
73) Sexual malaise.
74) He complained that I was spending too much time at Richmond Ice Rink.
75) The Royal Proclamation.
76) The pound sterling rose to $75.50.
77) Prince Andrew. Repeatedly.
78) Injection into the testicles.
79) The side-effects were permanent impotence and sterility. However, as immortality was ensured, no further offspring would be needed and the procreative urge would atrophy.
80) I seriously considered a sex-change operation.
81) Government White Paper on Immortality.
82) Compulsory injection into the testicles of the entire male population over eleven years.
83) Smith & Wesson short-barrel thirty-eight.

84) Entirely my own idea.
85) Many hours at Richmond Ice Rink trying unsuccessfully to erase the patterns of DNA.
86) Westminster Hall.
87) Premeditated. I questioned his real motives.
88) Assassination.
89) I was neither paid nor incited by agents of a foreign power.
90) Despair. I wish to go back to my cubicle at London Airport.
91) Between Princess Diana and the Governor of Nevada.
92) At the climax of *Thus Spake Zarathustra.*
93) Seven feet.
94) Three shots.
95) Blood Group O.
96) I did not wish to spend the rest of eternity in my own company.
97) I was visited in the death cell by the special envoy of the Archbishop of Canterbury.
98) That I had killed the Son of God.
99) He walked with a slight limp. He told me that, as a condemned prisoner, I alone had been spared the sterilising injections, and that the restoration of the national birthrate was now my sole duty.
100) Yes.

1985

THE MAN WHO WALKED ON THE MOON

I, too, was once an astronaut. As you see me sitting here, in this modest café with its distant glimpse of Copacabana Beach, you probably assume that I am a man of few achievements. The shabby briefcase between my worn heels, the stained suit with its frayed cuffs, the unsavoury hands ready to seize the first offer of a free drink, the whole air of failure . . . no doubt you think that I am a minor clerk who has missed promotion once too often, and that I amount to nothing, a person of no past and less future.

For many years I believed this myself. I had been abandoned by the authorities, who were glad to see me exiled to another continent, reduced to begging from the American tourists. I suffered from acute amnesia, and certain domestic problems with my wife and my mother. They now share my small apartment at Ipanema, while I am forced to live in a room above the projection booth of the Luxor Cinema, my thoughts drowned by the sound-tracks of science-fiction films.

So many tragic events leave me unsure of myself. Nonetheless, my confidence is returning, and a sense of my true history and worth. Chapters of my life are still hidden from me, and seem as jumbled as the film extracts which the projectionists screen each morning as they focus their cameras. I have still forgotten my years of training, and my mind bars from me any memory of the actual space-flights. But I am certain that I was once an astronaut.

Years ago, before I went into space, I followed many professions – freelance journalist, translator, on one occasion even a war correspondent sent to a small war, which unfortunately was never declared. I was in and out of newspaper offices all day, hoping for that one assignment that would match my talents.

Sadly, all this effort failed to get me to the top, and after ten years I found myself displaced by a younger generation. A certain reticence in my character, a sharpness of manner, set me off from my fellow journalists. Even the editors would laugh at me behind my back. I was given trivial assignments – film reviewing, or writing reports on office-equipment fairs. When the circulation wars began, in a doomed response to the onward sweep of television, the editors openly took exception to my waspish style. I became a part-time translator, and taught for an hour each day at a language school, but my income plummeted. My mother, whom I had

supported for many years, was forced to leave her home and join my wife and myself in our apartment at Ipanema.

At first my wife resented this, but soon she and my mother teamed up against me. They became impatient with the hours I spent delaying my unhappy visits to the single newspaper office that still held out hope – my journey to work was a transit between one door slammed on my heels and another slammed in my face.

My last friend at the newspaper commiserated with me, as I stood forlornly in the lobby. 'For heaven's sake, find a human-interest story! Something tender and affecting, that's what they want upstairs – life isn't an avant-garde movie!'

Pondering this sensible advice, I wandered into the crowded streets. I dreaded the thought of returning home without an assignment. The two women had taken to opening the apartment door together. They would stare at me accusingly, almost barring me from my own home.

Around me were the million faces of the city. People strode past, so occupied with their own lives that they almost pushed me from the pavement. A million human interest stories, of a banal and pointless kind, an encyclopaedia of mediocrity . . . Giving up, I left Copacabana Avenue and took refuge among the tables of a small café in a side-street.

It was there that I met the American astronaut, and began my own career in space.

The café terrace was almost deserted, as the office workers returned to their desks after lunch. Behind me, in the shade of the canvas awning, a fair-haired man in a threadbare tropical suit sat beside an empty glass. Guarding my coffee from the flies, I gazed at the small segment of sea visible beyond Copacabana Beach. Slowed by their mid-day meals, groups of American and European tourists strolled down from the hotels, waving away the jewellery salesmen and lottery touts. Perhaps I would visit Paris or New York, make a new life for myself as a literary critic . . .

A tartan shirt blocked my view of the sea and its narrow dream of escape. An elderly American, camera slung from his heavy neck, leaned across the table, his grey-haired wife in a loose floral dress beside him.

'Are you the astronaut?' the woman asked in a friendly but sly way, as if about to broach an indiscretion. 'The hotel said you would be at this café . . .'

'An astronaut?'

'Yes, the astronaut Commander Scranton . . . ?'

'No, I regret that I'm not an astronaut.' Then it occurred to me that this provincial couple, probably a dentist and his wife from the corn-belt, might benefit from a well-informed courier. Perhaps they imagined that their cruise ship had berthed at Miami? I stood up, managing a gallant smile. 'Of course, I'm a qualified translator. If you –'

'No, no . . .' Dismissing me with a wave, they moved through the empty tables. 'We came to see Mr Scranton.'

Baffled by this bizarre exchange, I watched them approach the man in the tropical suit. A nondescript fellow in his late forties, he had thinning blond hair and a strong-jawed American face from which all confidence had long been drained. He stared in a resigned way at his hands, which waited beside his empty glass, as if unable to explain to them that little refreshment would reach them that day. He was clearly undernourished, perhaps an ex-seaman who had jumped ship, one of thousands of down-and-outs trying to live by their wits on some of the hardest pavements in the world.

However, he looked up sharply enough as the elderly couple approached him. When they repeated their question about the astronaut he beckoned them to a seat. To my surprise, the waiter was summoned, and drinks were brought to the table. The husband unpacked his camera, while a relaxed conversation took place between his wife and this seedy figure.

'Dear, don't forget Mr Scranton . . .'

'Oh, please forgive me.'

The husband removed several bank-notes from his wallet. His wife passed them across the table to Scranton, who then stood up. Photographs were taken, first of Scranton standing next to the smiling wife, then of the husband grinning broadly beside the gaunt American. The source of all this good humour eluded me, as it did Scranton, whose eyes stared gravely at the street with a degree of respect due to the surface of the moon. But already a second group of tourists had walked down from Copacabana Beach, and I heard more laughter when one called out: 'There's the astronaut . . . !'

Quite mystified, I watched a further round of photographs being taken. The couples stood on either side of the American, grinning away as if he were a camel driver posing for pennies against a backdrop of the pyramids.

I ordered a small brandy from the waiter. He had ignored all this, pocketing his tips with a straight face.

'This fellow . . . ?' I asked. 'Who is he? An astronaut?'

'Of course . . .' The waiter flicked a bottle-top into the air and treated the sky to a knowing sneer. 'Who else but the man in the moon?'

The tourists had gone, strolling past the leatherware and jewellery stores. Alone now after his brief fame, the American sat among the empty glasses, counting the money he had collected.

The man in the moon?

Then I remembered the newspaper headline, and the exposé I had read two years earlier of this impoverished American who claimed to have been an astronaut, and told his story to the tourists for the price of a drink. At first almost everyone believed him, and he had become a popular figure in the hotel lobbies along Copacabana Beach. Apparently he had flown on one of the Apollo missions from Cape Kennedy in the 1970s, and his long-jawed face and stoical pilot's eyes seemed vaguely familiar from the magazine photographs. He was properly reticent, but if pressed with a

tourist dollar could talk convincingly about the early lunar flights. In its way it was deeply moving to sit at a café table with a man who had walked on the moon . . .

Then an over-curious reporter exploded the whole pretence. No man named Scranton had ever flown in space, and the American authorities confirmed that his photograph was not that of any past or present astronaut. In fact he was a failed crop-duster from Florida who had lost his pilot's licence and whose knowledge of the Apollo flights had been mugged up from newspapers and television programmes.

Surprisingly, Scranton's career had not ended there and then, but moved on to a second tragi-comical phase. Far from consigning him to oblivion, the exposure brought him a genuine small celebrity. Banished from the grand hotels of Copacabana, he hung about the cheaper cafés in the side-streets, still claiming to have been an astronaut, ignoring those who derided him from their car windows. The dignified way in which he maintained his fraud tapped a certain good-humoured tolerance, much like the affection felt in the United States for those eccentric old men who falsely claimed to their deaths that they were veterans of the American Civil War.

So Scranton stayed on, willing to talk for a few dollars about his journey to the moon, quoting the same tired phrases that failed to convince the youngest schoolboy. Soon no one bothered to question him closely, and his chief function was to be photographed beside parties of visitors, an amusing oddity of the tourist trail.

But perhaps the American was more devious than he appeared, with his shabby suit and hangdog gaze? As I sat there, guarding the brandy I could barely afford, I resented Scranton's bogus celebrity, and the tourist revenue it brought him. For years I, too, had maintained a charade – the mask of good humour that I presented to my colleagues in the newspaper world – but it had brought me nothing. Scranton at least was left alone for most of his time, something I craved more than any celebrity. Comparing our situations, there was plainly a strong element of injustice – the notorious British criminal who made a comfortable living being photographed by the tourists in the more expensive Copacabana restaurants had at least robbed one of Her Majesty's mail-trains.

At the same time, was this the human-interest story that would help me to remake my career? Could I provide a final ironic twist by revealing that, thanks to his exposure, the bogus astronaut was now doubly successful?

During the next days I visited the café promptly at noon. Note book at the ready, I kept a careful watch for Scranton. He usually appeared in the early afternoon, as soon as the clerks and secretaries had finished their coffee. In that brief lull, when the shadows crossed from one side of the street to the other, Scranton would materialise, as if from a trapdoor in the pavement. He was always alone, walking straight-backed in his faded suit, but with the uncertainty of someone who suspects that he is keeping

an appointment on the wrong day. He would slip into his place under the café awning, order a glass of beer from the sceptical waiter and then gaze across the street at the vistas of an invisible space.

It soon became clear that Scranton's celebrity was as threadbare as his shirt cuffs. Few tourists visited him, and often a whole afternoon passed without a single customer. Then the waiter would scrape the chairs around Scranton's table, trying to distract him from his reveries of an imaginary moon. Indeed, on the fourth day, within a few minutes of Scranton's arrival, the waiter slapped the table-top with his towel, already cancelling the afternoon's performance.

'Away, away . . . it's impossible!' He seized the newspaper that Scranton had found on a nearby chair. 'No more stories about the moon . . .'

Scranton stood up, head bowed beneath the awning. He seemed resigned to this abuse. 'All right . . . I can take my trade down the street.'

To forestall this, I left my seat and moved through the empty tables.

'Mr Scranton? Perhaps we can speak? I'd like to buy you a drink.'

'By all means.' Scranton beckoned me to a chair. Ready for business, he sat upright, and with a conscious effort managed to bring the focus of his gaze from infinity to a distance of fifty feet away. He was poorly nourished, and his perfunctory shave revealed an almost tubercular pallor. Yet there was a certain resolute quality about this vagrant figure that I had not expected. Sitting beside him, I was aware of an intense and almost wilful isolation, not just in this foreign city, but in the world at large.

I showed him my card. 'I'm writing a book of criticism on the science-fiction cinema. It would be interesting to hear your opinions. You are Commander Scranton, the Apollo astronaut?'

'That is correct.'

'Good. I wondered how you viewed the science-fiction film . . . how convincing you found the presentation of outer space, the lunar surface and so on . . .'

Scranton stared bleakly at the table-top. A faint smile exposed his yellowing teeth, and I assumed that he had seen through my little ruse.

'I'll be happy to set you straight,' he told me. 'But I make a small charge.'

'Of course,' I searched in my pockets. 'Your professional expertise, naturally . . .'

I placed some coins on the table, intending to hunt for a modest bank-note. Scranton selected three of the coins, enough to pay for a loaf of bread, and pushed the rest towards me.

'Science-fiction films –? They're good. Very accurate. On the whole I'd say they do an excellent job.'

'That's encouraging to hear. These Hollywood epics are not usually noted for their realism.'

'Well . . . you have to understand that the Apollo teams brought back a lot of film footage.'

'I'm sure.' I tried to keep the amusement out of my voice. 'The studios must have been grateful to you. After all, you could describe the actual moon-walks.'

Scranton nodded sagely. 'I acted as consultant to one of the Hollywood majors. All in all, you can take it from me that those pictures are pretty realistic.'

'Fascinating . . . coming from you that has authority. As a matter of interest, what was being on the moon literally like?'

For the first time Scranton seemed to notice me. Had he glimpsed some shared strain in our characters? This care-worn American had all the refinement of an unemployed car mechanic, and yet he seemed almost tempted to befriend me.

'Being on the moon?' His tired gaze inspected the narrow street of cheap jewellery stores, with its office messengers and lottery touts, the off-duty taxi-drivers leaning against their cars. 'It was just like being here.'

'So . . .' I put away my notebook. Any further subterfuge was unnecessary. I had treated our meeting as a joke, but Scranton was sincere, and anyway utterly indifferent to my opinion of him. The tourists and passing policemen, the middle-aged women sitting at a nearby table, together barely existed for him. They were no more than shadows on the screen of his mind, through which he could see the horizons of an almost planetary emptiness.

For the first time I was in the presence of someone who had nothing – even less than the beggars of Rio, for they at least were linked to the material world by their longings for it. Scranton embodied the absolute loneliness of the human being in space and time, a situation which in many ways I shared. Even the act of convincing himself that he was a former astronaut only emphasised his isolation.

'A remarkable story,' I commented. 'One can't help wondering if we were right to leave this planet. I'm reminded of the question posed by the Chilean painter Matta – "Why must we fear a disaster in space in order to understand our own times?" It's a pity you didn't bring back any mementoes of your moon-walks.'

Scranton's shoulders straightened. I could see him counting the coins on the table. 'I do have certain materials . . .'

I nearly laughed. 'What? A piece of lunar rock? Some moon dust?'

'Various photographic materials.'

'Photographs?' Was it possible that Scranton had told the truth, and that he had indeed been an astronaut? If I could prove that the whole notion of his imposture was an error, an oversight by the journalist who had investigated the case, I would have the makings of a front-page scoop . . . 'Could I see them? – perhaps I could use them in my book . . . ?'

'Well . . .' Scranton felt for the coins in his pocket. He looked hungry, and obviously thought only of spending them on a loaf of bread.

'Of course,' I added, 'I'll provide an extra fee. As for my book, the publishers might well pay many hundreds of dollars.'

'Hundreds . . .' Scranton seemed impressed. He shook his head, as if amused by the ways of the world. I expected him to be shy of revealing where he lived, but he stood up and gestured me to finish my drink. 'I'm staying a few minutes' walk from here.'

He waited among the tables, staring across the street. Seeing the passers-by through his eyes, I was aware that they had begun to seem almost transparent, shadow players created by a frolic of the sun.

We soon arrived at Scranton's modest room behind the Luxor Cinema, a small theatre off Copacabana Avenue that had seen better days. Two former storerooms and an office above the projection booth had been let as apartments, which we reached after climbing a dank emergency stairway.

Exhausted by the effort, Scranton swayed against the door. He wiped the spit from his mouth onto the lapel of his jacket, and ushered me into the room. 'Make yourself comfortable . . .'

A dusty light fell across the narrow bed, reflected in the cold-water tap of a greasy handbasin supported from the wall by its waste-pipe. Sheets of newspaper were wrapped around a pillow, stained with sweat and some unsavoury mucus, perhaps after an attack of malarial or tubercular fever.

Eager to leave this infectious den, I drew out my wallet. 'The photographs . . . ?'

Scranton sat on the bed, staring at the yellowing wall behind me as if he had forgotten that I was there. Once again I was aware of his ability to isolate himself from the surrounding world, a talent I envied him, if little else.

'Sure . . . they're over here.' He stood up and went to the suitcase that lay on a card table behind the door. Taking the money from me, he opened the lid and lifted out a bundle of magazines. Among them were loose pages torn from *Life* and *Newsweek*, and special supplements of the Rio newspapers devoted to the Apollo space-flights and the moon landings. The familiar images of Armstrong and the lunar module, the space-walks and splashdowns had been endlessly thumbed. The captions were marked with coloured pencil, as if Scranton had spent hours memorising these photographs brought back from the tideways of space.

I moved the magazines to one side, hoping to find some documentary evidence of Scranton's own involvement in the space-flights, perhaps a close-up photograph taken by a fellow astronaut.

'Is this it? There's nothing else?'

'That's it.' Scranton gestured encouragingly. 'They're good pictures. Pretty well what it was like.'

'I suppose that's true. I had hoped . . .'

I peered at Scranton, expecting some small show of embarrassment. These faded pages, far from being the mementoes of a real astronaut,

were obviously the prompt cards of an impostor. However, there was not the slightest doubt that Scranton was sincere.

I stood in the street below the portico of the Luxor Cinema, whose garish posters, advertising some science-fiction spectacular, seemed as inflamed as the mind of the American. Despite all that I had suspected, I felt an intense disappointment. I had deluded myself, thinking that Scranton would rescue my career. Now I was left with nothing but an empty notebook and the tram journey back to the crowded apartment in Ipanema. I dreaded the prospect of seeing my wife and my mother at the door, their eyes screwed to the same accusing focus.

Nonetheless, as I walked down Copacabana Avenue to the tram-stop, I felt a curious sense of release. The noisy pavements, the arrogant pickpockets plucking at my clothes, the traffic that aggravated the slightest tendency to migraines, all seemed to have receded, as if a small distance had opened between myself and the congested world. My meeting with Scranton, my brief involvement with this marooned man, allowed me to see everything in a more detached way. The businessmen with their briefcases, the afternoon tarts swinging their shiny handbags, the salesmen with their sheets of lottery tickets, almost deferred to me. Time and space had altered their perspectives, and the city was yielding to me. As I crossed the road to the tram-stop several minutes seemed to pass. But I was not run over.

This sense of a loosening air persisted as I rode back to Ipanema. My fellow passengers, who would usually have irritated me with their cheap scent and vulgar clothes, their look of bored animals in a menagerie, now scarcely intruded into my vision. I gazed down corridors of light that ran between them like the aisles of an open-air cathedral.

'You've found a story,' my wife announced within a second of opening the door.

'They've commissioned an article,' my mother confirmed. 'I knew they would.'

They stepped back and watched me as I made a leisurely tour of the cramped apartment. My changed demeanour clearly impressed them. They pestered me with questions, but even their presence was less bothersome. The universe, thanks to Scranton's example, had loosened its grip. Sitting at the dinner table, I silenced them with a raised finger.

'I am about to embark on a new career . . .'

From then on I became ever more involved with Scranton. I had not intended to see the American again, but the germ of his loneliness had entered my blood. Within two days I returned to the café in the side-street, but the tables were deserted. I watched as two parties of tourists stopped to ask for 'the astronaut'. I then questioned the waiter, suspecting that he had banished the poor man. But, no, the American would be back the next day, he had been ill, or perhaps had secretly gone to the moon on business.

In fact, it was three days before Scranton at last appeared. Materialising from the afternoon heat, he entered the café and sat under the awning. At first he failed to notice that I was there, but Scranton's mere presence was enough to satisfy me. The crowds and traffic, which had begun once again to close around me, halted their clamour and withdrew. On the noisy street were imposed the silences of a lunar landscape.

However, it was all too clear that Scranton had been ill. His face was sallow with fever, and the effort of sitting in his chair soon tired him. When the first American tourists stopped at his table he barely rose from his seat, and while the photographs were taken he held tightly to the awning above his head.

By the next afternoon his fever had subsided, but he was so strained and ill-kempt that the waiter at first refused to admit him to the café. A trio of Californian spinsters who approached his table were clearly unsure that this decaying figure was indeed the bogus astronaut, and would have left had I not ushered them back to Scranton.

'Yes, this is Commander Scranton, the famous astronaut. I am his associate – do let me hold your camera . . .'

I waited impatiently for them to leave, and sat down at Scranton's table. Ill the American might be, but I needed him. After ordering a brandy, I helped Scranton to hold the glass. As I pressed the spinsters' bank-note into his pocket I could feel that his suit was soaked with sweat.

'I'll walk you back to your room. Don't thank me, it's in my direction.'

'Well, I could use an arm.' Scranton stared at the street, as if its few yards encompassed a Grand Canyon of space. 'It's getting to be a long way.'

'A long way! Scranton, I understand that . . .'

It took us half an hour to cover the few hundred yards to the Luxor Cinema. But already time was becoming an elastic dimension, and from then on most of my waking hours were spent with Scranton. Each morning I would visit the shabby room behind the cinema, bringing a paper bag of sweet-cakes and a flask of tea I had prepared in the apartment under my wife's suspicious gaze. Often the American had little idea who I was, but this no longer worried me. He lay in his narrow bed, letting me raise his head as I changed the sheets of newspaper that covered his pillow. When he spoke, his voice was too weak to be heard above the sound-tracks of the science-fiction films that boomed through the crumbling walls.

Even in this moribund state, Scranton's example was a powerful tonic, and when I left him in the evening I would walk the crowded streets without any fear. Sometimes my former colleagues called to me from the steps of the newspaper office, but I was barely aware of them, as if they were planetary visitors hailing me from the edge of a remote crater.

Looking back on these exhilarating days, I regret only that I never called a doctor to see Scranton. Frequently, though, the American would recover his strength, and after I had shaved him we would go down into the street. I relished these outings with Scranton. Arm in arm, we moved

through the afternoon crowds, which seemed to part around us. Our fellow-pedestrians had become remote and fleeting figures, little more than tricks of the sun. Sometimes, I could no longer see their faces. It was then that I observed the world through Scranton's eyes, and knew what it was to be an astronaut.

Needless to say, the rest of my life had collapsed at my feet. Having given up my work as a translator, I soon ran out of money, and was forced to borrow from my mother. At my wife's instigation, the features editor of the newspaper called me to his office, and made it plain that as an immense concession (in fact he had always been intrigued by my wife) he would let me review a science-fiction film at the Luxor. Before walking out, I told him that I was already too familiar with the film, and my one hope was to see it banned from the city forever.

So ended my connection with the newspaper. Soon after, the two women evicted me from my apartment. I was happy to leave them, taking with me only the reclining sun-chair on which my wife passed most of her days in preparation for her new career as a model. The sun-chair became my bed when I moved into Scranton's room.

By then the decline in Scranton's health forced me to be with him constantly. Far from being an object of charity, Scranton was now my only source of income. Our needs for several days could be met by a single session with the American tourists. I did my best to care for Scranton, but during his final illness I was too immersed in that sense of an emptying world even to notice the young doctor whose alarmed presence filled the tiny room. By a last irony, towards the end even Scranton himself seemed barely visible to me. As he died I was reading the mucus-stained headlines on his pillow.

After Scranton's death I remained in his room at the Luxor. Despite the fame he had once enjoyed, his burial at the Protestant cemetery was attended only by myself, but in a sense this was just, as he and I were the only real inhabitants of the city. Later I went through the few possessions in his suitcase, and found a faded pilot's log-book. Its pages confirmed that Scranton had worked as a pilot for a crop-spraying company in Florida throughout the years of the Apollo programme.

Nonetheless, Scranton had travelled in space. He had known the loneliness of separation from all other human beings, he had gazed at the empty perspectives that I myself had seen. Curiously, the pages torn from the news magazines seemed more real than the pilot's log-book. The photographs of Armstrong and his fellow astronauts were really of Scranton and myself as we walked together on the moon of this world.

I reflected on this as I sat at the small café in the side-street. As a gesture to Scranton's memory, I had chosen his chair below the awning. I thought of the planetary landscapes that Scranton had taught me to see, those empty vistas devoid of human beings. Already I was aware of a previous career, which my wife and the pressures of everyday life had

hidden from me. There were the years of training for a great voyage, and a coastline similar to that of Cape Kennedy receding below me . . .

My reverie was interrupted by a pair of American tourists. A middle-aged man and his daughter, who held the family camera to her chin, approached the table.

'Excuse me,' the man asked with an over-ready smile. 'Are you the . . . the astronaut? We were told by the hotel that you might be here . . .'

I stared at them without rancour, treating them to a glimpse of those eyes that had seen the void. I, too, had walked on the moon.

'Please sit down,' I told them casually. 'Yes, I am the astronaut.'

1985

THE SECRET HISTORY OF WORLD WAR 3

Now that World War 3 has safely ended, I feel free to comment on two remarkable aspects of the whole terrifying affair. The first is that this long-dreaded nuclear confrontation, which was widely expected to erase all life from our planet, in fact lasted barely four minutes. This will surprise many of those reading the present document, but World War 3 took place on 27 January 1995, between 6:47 and 6:51 p.m. Eastern Standard Time. The entire duration of hostilities, from President Reagan's formal declaration of war, to the launch of five sea-based nuclear missiles (three American and two Russian), to the first peace-feelers and the armistice agreed by the President and Mr Gorbachev, lasted no more than 245 seconds. World War 3 was over almost before anyone realised that it had begun.

The other extraordinary feature of World War 3 is that I am virtually the only person to know that it ever occurred. It may seem strange that a suburban paediatrician living in Arlington, a few miles west of Washington DC, should alone be aware of this unique historical event. After all, the news of every downward step in the deepening political crisis, the ailing President's declaration of war and the following nuclear exchange, was openly broadcast on nationwide television. World War 3 was not a secret, but people's minds were addressed to more important matters. In their obsessive concern for the health of their political leadership, they were miraculously able to ignore a far greater threat to their own well-being.

Of course, strictly speaking, I was not the only person to have witnessed World War 3. A small number of senior military personnel in the Nato and Warsaw Pact high commands, as well as President Reagan, Mr Gorbachev and their aides, and the submarine officers who decrypted the nuclear launch codes and sent the missiles on their way (into unpopulated areas of Alaska and eastern Siberia), were well aware that war had been declared, and a ceasefire agreed four minutes later. But I have yet to meet a member of the ordinary public who has heard of World War 3. Whenever I refer to the war, people stare at me with incredulity. Several parents have withdrawn their children from the paediatric clinic, obviously concerned for my mental stability. Only yesterday one mother to whom I casually mentioned the war later telephoned my wife to express her anxieties. But Susan, like everyone else, has forgotten the war, even though I have played video-recordings to her of the ABC, NBC and CNN newscasts on 27 January which actually announce that World War 3 has begun.

* * *

That I alone happened to learn of the war I put down to the curious character of the Reagan third term. It is no exaggeration to say that the United States, and much of the western world, had deeply missed this amiable old actor who retired to California in 1989 after the inauguration of his luckless successor. The multiplication of the world's problems – the renewed energy crises, the second Iran/Iraq conflict, the destabilisation of the Soviet Union's Asiatic republics, the unnerving alliance in the USA between Islam and militant feminism – all prompted an intense nostalgia for the Reagan years. There was an immense affectionate memory of his gaffes and little incompetencies, his fondness (shared by those who elected him) for watching TV in his pyjamas rather than attending to more important matters, his confusion of reality with the half-remembered movies of his youth.

Tourists congregated in their hundreds outside the gates of the Reagans' retirement home in Bel Air, and occasionally the former President would totter out to pose on the porch. There, prompted by a still soignée Nancy, he would utter some amiable generality that brought tears to his listeners' eyes, and lifted both their hearts and stock markets around the world. As his successor's term in office drew to its unhappy close, the necessary constitutional amendment was swiftly passed through both Houses of Congress, with the express purpose of seeing that Reagan could enjoy his third term in the White House.

In January 1993 more than a million people turned out to cheer his inaugural drive through the streets of Washington, while the rest of the world watched on television. If the cathode eye could weep, it did so then.

Nonetheless, a few doubts remained, as the great political crises of the world stubbornly refused to be banished even by the aged President's ingratiating grin. The Iran/Iraq war threatened to embroil Turkey and Afghanistan. In defiance of the Kremlin, the Asiatic republics of the USSR were forming armed militias. Yves Saint Laurent had designed the first chador for the power-dressing Islamicised feminists in the fashionable offices of Manhattan, London and Paris. Could even the Reagan presidency cope with a world so askew?

Along with my fellow-physicians who had watched the President on television, I seriously doubted it. At this time, in the summer of 1994, Ronald Reagan was a man of eighty-three, showing all the signs of advancing senility. Like many old men, he enjoyed a few minutes each day of modest lucidity, during which he might utter some gnomic remark, and then lapse into a glassy twilight. His eyes were now too blurred to read the teleprompter, but his White House staff took advantage of the hearing aid he had always worn to insert a small speaker, so that he was able to recite his speeches by repeating like a child whatever he heard in his earpiece. The pauses were edited out by the TV networks, but the hazards of remote control were revealed when the President, addressing the Catholic Mothers of America, startled the massed ranks of blue-rinsed

ladies by suddenly repeating a studio engineer's aside: 'Shift your ass, I gotta take a leak.'

Watching this robotic figure with his eerie smiles and goofy grins, a few people began to ask if the President was brain-dead, or even alive at all. To reassure the nervous American public, unsettled by a falling stock market and by the news of armed insurrection in the Ukraine, the White House physicians began to release a series of regular reports on the President's health. A team of specialists at the Walter Reed Hospital assured the nation that he enjoyed the robust physique and mental alertness of a man fifteen years his junior. Precise details of Reagan's blood pressure, his white and red cell counts, pulse and respiration were broadcast on TV and had an immediately calming effect. On the following day the world's stock markets showed a memorable lift, interest rates fell and Mr Gorbachev was able to announce that the Ukrainian separatists had moderated their demands.

Taking advantage of the unsuspected political asset represented by the President's bodily functions, the White House staff decided to issue their medical bulletins on a weekly basis. Not only did Wall Street respond positively, but opinion polls showed a strong recovery by the Republican Party as a whole. By the time of the mid-term Congressional elections, the medical reports were issued daily, and successful Republican candidates swept to control of both House and Senate thanks to an eve-of-poll bulletin on the regularity of the Presidential bowels.

From then on the American public was treated to a continuous stream of information on the President's health. Successive newscasts throughout the day would carry updates on the side-effects of a slight chill or the circulatory benefits of a dip in the White House pool. I well remember watching the news on Christmas Eve as my wife prepared our evening meal, and noticing that details of the President's health occupied five of the six leading news items.

'So his blood sugar is a little down,' Susan remarked as she laid the festival table. 'Good news for Quaker Oats and Pepsi.'

'Really? Is there a connection, for heaven's sake?'

'Much more than you realise.' She sat beside me on the sofa, pepper-mill in hand. 'We'll have to wait for his latest urinalysis. It could be crucial.'

'Dear, what's happening on the Pakistan border could be crucial. Gorbachev has threatened a pre-emptive strike against the rebel enclaves. The US has treaty obligations, theoretically a war could –'

'Sh . . .' Susan tapped my knee with the pepper-mill. 'They've just run an Eysenck Personality Inventory – the old boy's scored full marks on emotional resonance and ability to relate. Results corrected for age, whatever that means.'

'It means he's practically a basket case.' I was about to change channels, hoping for some news of the world's real troublespots, but a curious

pattern had appeared along the bottom of the screen, some kind of Christmas decoration, I assumed, a line of stylised holly leaves. The rhythmic wave stabbed softly from left to right, accompanied by the soothing and nostalgic strains of 'White Christmas'.

'Good God . . .' Susan whispered in awe. 'It's Ronnie's pulse. Did you hear the announcer? "Transmitted live from the Heart of the Presidency".'

This was only the beginning. During the next few weeks, thanks to the miracle of modern radio-telemetry, the nation's TV screens became a scoreboard registering every detail of the President's physical and mental functions. His brave, if tremulous, heartbeat drew its trace along the lower edge of the screen, while above it newscasters expanded on his daily physical routines, on the twenty-eight feet he had walked in the rose garden, the calorie count of his modest lunches, the results of his latest brain-scan, read-outs of his kidney, liver and lung function. In addition, there was a daunting sequence of personality and IQ tests, all designed to reassure the American public that the man at the helm of the free world was more than equal to the daunting tasks that faced him across the Oval Office desk.

For all practical purposes, as I tried to explain to Susan, the President was scarcely more than a corpse wired for sound. I and my colleagues at the paediatric clinic were well aware of the old man's ordeal in submitting to this battery of tests. However, the White House staff knew that the American public was almost mesmerised by the spectacle of the President's heartbeat. The trace now ran below all other programmes, accompanying sit-coms, basketball matches and old World War 2 movies. Uncannily, its quickening beat would sometimes match the audience's own emotional responses, indicating that the President himself was watching the same war films, including those in which he had appeared.

To complete the identification of President and TV screen – a consummation of which his political advisers had dreamed for so long – the White House staff arranged for further layers of information to be transmitted. Soon a third of the nation's TV screens was occupied by print-outs of heartbeat, blood pressure and EEG readings. Controversy briefly erupted when it became clear that delta waves predominated, confirming the long-held belief that the President was asleep for most of the day. However, the audiences were thrilled to know when Mr Reagan moved into REM sleep, the dream-time of the nation coinciding with that of its chief executive.

Untouched by this endless barrage of medical information, events in the real world continued down their perilous road. I bought every newspaper I could find, but their pages were dominated by graphic displays of the Reagan health bulletins and by expository articles outlining the significance of his liver enzyme functions and the slightest rise or fall in the concentration of the Presidential urine. Tucked away on the back

pages I found a few brief references to civil war in the Asiatic republics of the Soviet Union, an attempted pro-Russian putsch in Pakistan, the Chinese invasion of Nepal, the mobilisation of Nato and Warsaw Pact reserves, the reinforcement of the US 5th and 7th Fleets.

But these ominous events, and the threat of a Third World War, had the ill luck to coincide with a slight down-turn in the President's health. First reported on 20 January, this trivial cold caught by Reagan from a visiting grandchild drove all other news from the television screens. An army of reporters and film crews camped outside the White House, while a task force of specialists from the greatest research institutions in the land appeared in relays on every channel, interpreting the stream of medical data.

Like a hundred million Americans, Susan spent the next week sitting by the TV set, eyes following the print-out of the Reagan heartbeat.

'It's still only a cold,' I reassured her when I returned from the clinic on 27 January. 'What's the latest from Pakistan? There's a rumour that the Soviets have dropped paratroops into Karachi. The Delta force is moving from Subik Bay . . .'

'Not now!' She waved me aside, turning up the volume as an anchorman began yet another bulletin.

'. . . here's an update on our report of two minutes ago. Good news on the President's CAT scan. There are no abnormal variations in the size or shape of the President's ventricles. Light rain is forecast for the DC area tonight, and the 8th Air Cavalry have exchanged fire with Soviet border patrols north of Kabul. We'll be back after the break with a report on the significance of that left temporal lobe spike . . .'

'For God's sake, there's no significance.' I took the remote control unit from Susan's clenched hand and began to hunt the channels. 'What about the Russian Baltic Fleet? The Kremlin is putting counter-pressure on Nato's northern flank. The US has to respond . . .'

By luck, I caught a leading network newscaster concluding a bulletin. He beamed confidently at the audience, his glamorous copresenter smiling in anticipation.

'. . . as of 5:05 Eastern Standard Time we can report that Mr Reagan's inter-cranial pressure is satisfactory. All motor and cognitive functions are normal for a man of the President's age. Repeat, motor and cognitive functions are normal. Now, here's a newsflash that's just reached us. At 2:35 local time President Reagan completed a satisfactory bowel motion.' The newscaster turned to his copresenter. 'Barbara, I believe you have similar good news on Nancy?'

'Thank you, Dan,' she cut in smoothly. 'Yes, just one hour later, at 3:35 local time, Nancy completed her very own bowel motion, her second for the day, so it's all happening in the First Family.' She glanced at a slip of paper pushed across her desk. 'The traffic in Pennsylvania Avenue is seizing up again, while F-16s of the 6th Fleet have shot down seven MiG 29s over the Bering Strait. The President's

blood pressure is 100 over 60. The ECG records a slight left-hand tremor . . .'

'A tremor of the left hand . . .' Susan repeated, clenching her fists. 'Surely that's serious?'

I tapped the channel changer. 'It could be. Perhaps he's thinking about having to press the nuclear button. Or else –'

An even more frightening possibility had occurred to me. I plunged through the medley of competing news bulletins, hoping to distract Susan as I glanced at the evening sky over Washington. The Soviet deep-water fleet patrolled 400 miles from the eastern coast of the United States. Soon mushroom clouds could be rising above the Pentagon.

'. . . mild pituitary dysfunction is reported, and the President's physicians have expressed a modest level of concern. Repeat, a modest level of concern. The President convened the National Security Council some thirty minutes ago. SAC headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska, report all B-52 attack squadrons airborne. Now, I've just been handed a late bulletin from the White House Oncology Unit. A benign skin tumour was biopsied at 4:15 Washington time . . .'

'. . . the President's physicians have again expressed their concern over Mr Reagan's calcified arteries and hardened cardiac valves. Hurricane Clara is now expected to bypass Puerto Rico, and the President has invoked the Emergency War Powers Act. After the break we'll have more expert analysis of Mr Reagan's retrograde amnesia. Remember, this condition can point to suspected Korsakoff syndrome . . .'

'. . . psychomotor seizures, a distorted sense of time, colour changes and dizziness. Mr Reagan also reports an increased awareness of noxious odours. Other late news – blizzards cover the mid-west, and a state of war now exists between the United States and the Soviet Union. Stay tuned to this channel for a complete update on the President's brain metabolism . . .'

'We're at war,' I said to Susan, and put my arms around her shoulders. But she was pointing to the erratic heart trace on the screen. Had the President suffered a brain storm and launched an all-out nuclear attack on the Russians? Were the incessant medical bulletins a clever camouflage to shield a volatile TV audience from the consequences of a desperate response to a national emergency? It would take only minutes for the Russian missiles to reach Washington, and I stared at the placid winter sky. Holding Susan in my arms, I listened to the cacophony of medical bulletins until, some four minutes later, I heard:

'. . . the President's physicians report dilated pupils and convulsive tremor, but neurochemical support systems are functioning adequately. The President's brain metabolism reveals increased glucose production. Scattered snow-showers are forecast overnight, and a cessation of hostilities has been agreed between the US and the USSR. After the break –

the latest expert comment on that attack of Presidential flatulence. And why Nancy's left eyelid needed a tuck . . .'

I switched off the set and sat back in the strange silence. A small helicopter was crossing the grey sky over Washington. Almost as an afterthought, I said to Susan: 'By the way, World War 3 has just ended.'

Of course, Susan had no idea that the war had ever begun, a common failure among the public at large, as I realised over the next few weeks. Most people had only a vague recollection of the unrest in the Middle East. The news that nuclear bombs had landed in the deserted mountains of Alaska and eastern Siberia was lost in the torrent of medical reports that covered President Reagan's recovery from his cold.

In the second week of February 1995 I watched him on television as he presided over an American Legion ceremony on the White House lawn. His aged, ivory face was set in its familiar amiable grin, his eyes unfocused as he stood supported by two aides, the ever-watchful First Lady standing in her steely way beside him. Somewhere beneath the bulky black overcoat the radio-telemetry sensors transmitted the live print-outs of pulse, respiration and blood pressure that we could see on our screens. I guessed that the President, too, had forgotten that he had recently launched the Third World War. After all, no one had been killed, and in the public's mind the only possible casualty of those perilous hours had been Mr Reagan himself as he struggled to survive his cold.

Meanwhile, the world was a safer place. The brief nuclear exchange had served its warning to the quarrelling factions around the planet. The secessionist movements in the Soviet Union had disbanded themselves, while elsewhere invading armies withdrew behind their frontiers. I could almost believe that World War 3 had been contrived by the Kremlin and the White House staff as a peacemaking device, and that the Reagan cold had been a diversionary trap into which the TV networks and newspapers had unwittingly plunged.

In tribute to the President's recuperative powers, the linear traces of his vital functions still notched their way across our TV screens. As he saluted the assembled veterans of the American Legion, I sensed the audience's collective pulse beating faster when the old actor's heart responded to the stirring sight of these marching men.

Then, among the Medal of Honor holders, I noticed a dishevelled young man in an ill-fitting uniform, out of step with his older companions. He pushed through the marching files as he drew a pistol from his tunic. There was a flurry of confusion while aides grappled with each other around the podium. The cameras swerved to catch the young man darting towards the President. Shots sounded above the wavering strains of the band. In the panic of uniformed men the President seemed to fall into the First Lady's arms and was swiftly borne away.

Searching the print-outs below the TV screen, I saw at once that the President's blood pressure had collapsed. The erratic pulse had levelled out

into an unbroken horizontal line, and all respiratory function had ceased. It was only ten minutes later, as news was released of an unsuccessful assassination attempt, that the traces resumed their confident signatures.

Had the President died, perhaps for a second time? Had he, in a strict sense, ever lived during his third term of office? Will some animated spectre of himself, reconstituted from the medical print-outs that still parade across our TV screens, go on to yet further terms, unleashing Fourth and Fifth World Wars, whose secret histories will expire within the interstices of our television schedules, forever lost within the ultimate urinalysis, the last great biopsy in the sky?

1988

LOVE IN A COLDER CLIMATE

Anyone reading this confession in 1989, the year when I was born, would have been amazed to find me complaining about a state of affairs that must in every respect have resembled paradise. However, yesterday's heaven all too easily becomes today's hell. The greatest voluptuary dream of mankind, which has lifted the spirits of poets and painters, presidents and peasants, has turned only twenty-two years later into a living nightmare. For young men of my own generation (the word provokes a shudder in the heart, if nowhere else), the situation has become so desperate that any escape seems justified. The price that I have paid for my freedom may seem excessive, but I am happy to have made this savage, if curious, bargain.

Soon after I reached my twenty-first birthday I was ordered to enlist for my two years of national service, and I remember thinking how much my father and grandfather would have envied me. On a pleasant summer evening in 2010, after a tiring day at the medical school, I was ringing the doorbell of an apartment owned by an attractive young woman whose name I had been given. I had never met her, but I was confident that she would greet me in the friendliest way – so friendly that within a few minutes we would be lying naked together in bed. Needless to say, no money would change hands, and neither she nor I would play our parts for less than the most patriotic motives. Yet both of us would loathe the sight and touch of the other and would be only too relieved when we parted an hour later.

Sure enough, the door opened to reveal a confident young brunette with a welcoming, if brave, smile. According to my assignment card, she was Victoria Hale, a financial journalist on a weekly news magazine. Her eyes glanced at my face and costume in the shrewd way she might have scanned a worthy but dull company prospectus.

'David Bradley?' She read my name from her own assignment card, trying hard to muster a show of enthusiasm. 'You're a medical student . . . How fascinating.'

'It's wonderful to meet you, Victoria,' I riposted. 'I've always wanted to know about . . . financial journalism.'

I stood awkwardly in the centre of her apartment, my legs turning to lead. These lines of dialogue, like those that followed, had seemed preposterous when I first uttered them. But my supervisor had wisely insisted that I stick to the script, and already, after only three months

of national service, I was aware that the formalised dialogue, like our absurd costumes, provided a screen behind which we could hide our real feelings.

I was wearing the standard-issue Prince Valiant suit, which a careful survey of the TV programmes of the 1960s had confirmed to be the most sexually attractive costume for the predatory male. In a suit like this Elvis Presley had roused the Las Vegas matrons to an ecstasy of abandon, though I found its tassels, gold braid and tight crotch as comfortable as the decorations on a Christmas tree.

Victoria Hale, for her part, was wearing a classic Playboy bunny outfit of the same period. As she served me a minute measure of vodka her breasts managed to be both concealed and exposed in a way that an earlier generation must have found irresistibly fascinating, like the rabbit tail that bounced above her contorted buttocks, a furry metronome which already had me glancing at my wristwatch.

'Mr Bradley, we can get it over with now,' she remarked briskly. She had departed from the script but quickly added: 'Now tell me about your work, David. I can see that you're such an interesting man.'

She was as bored with me as I was uneasy with her, but in a few minutes we would be lying together in bed. With luck my hormonal and nervous systems would come to my rescue and bring our meeting to a climax. We would initial each other's assignment cards and make a thankful return to our ordinary lives. Yet the very next evening another young man in a Prince Valiant suit would ring the doorbell of the apartment, and this thoughtful journalist would greet him in her grotesque costume. And I, in turn, at eight o'clock would put aside my anatomy textbooks and set out through the weary streets to an arranged meeting in an unknown apartment, where some pleasant young woman – student, waitress or librarian – would welcome me with the same formal smile and stoically take me to bed.

To understand this strange world where sex has become compulsory, one must look back to the ravages brought about in the last decade of the 20th century by the scourge of Aids and the pandemic of associated diseases clustered around its endlessly mutating virus. By the mid-1990s this ferocious plague had begun to threaten more than the millions of individual lives. The institutions of marriage and the family, ideals of parenthood, and the social contract between the sexes, even the physical relationship between man and woman, had been corrupted by this cruel disease. Terrified of infection, people learnt to abstain from every kind of physical or sexual contact. From puberty onward, an almost visible cordon divided the sexes. In offices, factories, schools and universities the young men and women kept their distance. My own parents in the 1980s were among the last generation to marry without any fear of what their union might produce. By the 1990s, too often, courtship and marriage would be followed by a series of mysterious ailments, anxious visits to a test clinic, a positive diagnosis and the terminal hospice.

Faced with a plunging birth rate and with a nation composed almost entirely of solitary celibates, the government could resort only to its traditional instruments – legislation and compulsion. Urged on by the full authority of the Protestant and Catholic churches, the Third Millennium was greeted with the momentous announcement that thenceforth sex would be compulsory. All fertile, healthy and HIV-negative young men and women were required to register for their patriotic duty. On reaching their twenty-first birthdays they were assigned a personal supervisor (usually a local clergyman, the priesthood alone having the moral qualifications for such a delicate task), who drew up a list of possible mates and arranged a programme of sexual liaisons. Within a year, it was hoped, the birth rate would soar, and marriage and the family would be re-established.

At first, only one assignation each week was required, but the birth rate stubbornly refused to respond, possibly as a result of the sexual ineptness of these celibate young men and women. By the year 2005 the number of compulsory assignations was raised to three each week. Since clearly nothing could be left to nature, the participants were issued with costumes designed to enhance their attractiveness. In addition to the Prince Valiant and the Bunny Girl, there were the Castilian Waiter and the Gypsy Brigand for men and the Cheerleader and the Miss America swimsuit for women.

Even so, the earliest participants would often sit tongue-tied for hours, unable to approach each other, let alone hold hands. From then on they were carefully coached in the amatory arts by their clergymen-supervisors, who would screen erotic videos for the young recruits in their church halls, by now substantial warehouses of pornographic films and magazines.

As could be expected, the threat of two years of enforced sexual activity was deeply resented by the conscripted young men and women. Draft-dodging was carried to extreme lengths, of which vasectomy was the most popular, any perpetrators being sentenced to a testicular transplant. To prevent the young people from failing to perform their sexual duties, a network of undercover inspectors (usually novice priests and nuns, since only they possessed the necessary spirit of self-sacrifice) posed as the participants and would exact fierce on-the-spot fines for any slackening-off or lack of zeal.

All this at last had its effect on the birth rate, which began its reluctant ascent. The news was little consolation to those like myself, who every evening were obliged to leave our homes and trudge the streets on the way to yet another hour of loveless sex. How I longed for June 2012, when I would complete my period of patriotic duty and begin my real sex life of eternal celibacy.

Those dreams, though, came to an abrupt end in the spring of 2011, when I called upon Lucille McCabe. After meeting her I woke to discover a lost world of passion and the affections whose existence I

had never suspected, and to fulfill my life's ambition in a way I had not foreseen.

Lucille McCabe, my assignment for the evening, lived in the Spanish quarter of the city, and to avoid any catcalls – those of us doing our patriotic duty were figures of fun, not envy – I had dressed in my Castilian Waiter costume. The apartment was in a nondescript building kept on its feet by an armature of crumbling fire escapes. An elevator surely booked into a museum of industrial archaeology carried me grudgingly to the seventh floor. The bell hung by a single exposed wire, and I had to tap several times on the door. The silence made me hope that Miss McCabe, a lecturer in English literature, had been called away for the evening.

But the door opened with a jerk, revealing a small, white-faced young woman with spiky black hair, dressed in a polka-dot leotard like a punk circus clown.

'Miss McCabe . . . ?' I began. 'Are you –'

'Ready to order?' She gazed with mock wide eyes at my waiter's costume. 'Yes, I'll have a paella with a side dish of gambas. And don't forget the Tabasco.'

'Tabasco? Look, I'm David Bradley, your partner for –'

'Relax, Mr Bradley.' She closed the door and snatched the keys from the lock, which she jingled in my face. 'It was a joke. Remember those?'

'Only just.' Clearly I was in the presence of a maverick, one of those wayward young women who affected an antic air as a way of rising above the occasion. 'Well, it's wonderful to see you, Lucille. I've always wanted to know about English literature.'

'Forget it. How long have you been doing this? You don't look totally numbed.' She stood with her back to me by the crowded bookshelf, fingers drumming along the titles as if hunting for some manual that would provide a solution to the problem posed by my arrival. For all the bravado, her shoulders were shaking. 'Is this where I fix you a drink? I can't remember that awful script.'

'Skip the drink. We can get straight on with it if you're in a hurry.'

'I'm not in a hurry at all.' She walked stiffly into the bedroom and sat like a moody teenager on the unmade divan. Nothing in my counselling sessions, the long hours watching porno videos in the church hall, had prepared me for all this – the non-regulation costume, the tousled sheets, the absence of flattering chitchat. Was she a new kind of undercover inspector, an *agent provocateur* targeted at those potential subversives like myself? Already I saw my work norm increased to seven evenings a week. Beyond that lay the fearsome threat of a testicular booster . . .

Then I noticed her torn assignment card on the carpet at her feet. No inspector, however devious, would ever maltreat an assignment card.

Wondering how to console her, I stepped forward. But as I crossed the threshold a small, strong hand shot up.

'Stay there!' She gazed at me with the desperate look of a child about to be assaulted, and I realised that for all her fierceness she was a novice

recruit, probably on her first assignment. The spiked tips of her hair were trembling like the eye feathers of a trapped peafowl.

'All right, you can come in. Do you want something to eat? I can guarantee the best scrambled egg in town, my hands are shaking so much. How do you put up with all this?'

'I don't think about it any more.'

'I don't think about anything else. Look, Mr Bradley – David, or whatever you're called – I can't go through with this. I don't want to fight with you . . .'

'Don't worry.' I raised my hands, already thinking about the now free evening. 'I'm on my way. The rules forbid all use of force, no fumbling hands or wrestling.'

'How sensible. And how different from my grandmother's day.' She smiled bleakly, as if visualising the courtship that had led to the conception of her own mother. With a nervous shrug, she followed me to the door. 'Tell me, what happens next? I know you have to report me.'

'Well . . . there's nothing too serious.' I hesitated to describe the long counselling sessions that lay ahead, the weeks of being harangued by relays of nuns brandishing their videos. After all the talk there was chemotherapy, when she would be so sedated that nothing mattered, and she would close her eyes and think of her patriotic duty and the next generation, the playgrounds full of laughing tots, one of them her own . . . 'I shouldn't worry. They're very civilised. At least you'll get a better apartment.'

'Oh, thanks. Once, you must have been rather sweet. But they get you in the end . . .'

I took the latchkey from her hand, wondering how to reassure her. The dye had run down her powdered forehead, a battle line redrawn across her brain. She stood with her back against the bookshelves, a woad-streaked Boadicea facing the Roman legions. Despite her distress, I had the curious sense that she was as concerned for me as for herself and even now was trying to work out some strategy that would save us both.

'No . . .' I closed the door and locked it again. 'They won't get you. Not necessarily . . .'

My love affair with Lucille McCabe began that evening, but the details of our life together belong to the private domain. Not that there is anything salacious to reveal. As it happens, our relationship was never consummated in the physical sense, but this did not in any way diminish my deep infatuation with this remarkable young woman. The long months of my national service notwithstanding, the hundreds of reluctant Rebeccas and stoical Susans, I soon felt that Lucille McCabe was the only woman I had ever really known. During the six months of our clandestine affair I discovered a wealth of emotion and affection that made me envy all earlier generations.

At the start, my only aim was to save Lucille. I forged signatures, hoodwinked a distracted supervisor confused by the derelict apartment

building, begged or bribed my friends to swap shifts, and Lucille feigned a pregnancy with the aid of a venal laboratory technician. Marriage or any monogamous relationship was taboo during the period of one's patriotic duty, the desired aim being an open promiscuity and the greatest possible stirring of the gene pool. Nonetheless, I was able to spend almost all my spare time with Lucille, acting as lover, night watchman, spymaster and bodyguard. She, in turn, made sure that my medical studies were not neglected. Once I had qualified and she herself was free to marry, we would legally become man and wife.

Inevitably we were discovered by a suspicious supervisor with an over-sensitive computer. I had already realised that we would be exposed, and during these last months I became more and more protective of Lucille, even feeling the first pangs of jealousy. I would attend her lectures, sitting in the back row and resenting any student who asked an over-elaborate question. At my insistence she abandoned her punk hairstyle for something less provocative and modestly lowered her eyes whenever a man passed her in the street.

All this tension was to explode when the supervisor arrived at Lucille's apartment. The sight of this dark-eyed young Jesuit in his Gypsy Brigand costume, mouthing his smooth amatory patter as he expertly steered Lucille towards her bedroom, proved too much for me. I gave way to a paroxysm of violence, hurling the fellow from the apartment.

From the moment the ambulance and police were called, our scheme was over. Lucille was assigned to a rehabilitation centre, once a church home for fallen mothers, and I was brought before a national service tribunal.

In vain I protested that I wished to marry Lucille and father her child. I had merely behaved like a male of old and was passionately dedicated to my future wife and family.

But this, I was told, was a selfish aberration. I was found guilty of the romantic fallacy and convicted of having an exalted and idealised vision of woman. I was sentenced to a further three years of patriotic duty.

If I rejected this, I would face the ultimate sanction.

Aware that by choosing the latter I would be able to see Lucille, I made my decision. The tribunal despaired of me, but as a generous concession to a former student of medicine, they allowed me to select my own surgeon.

1989

THE ENORMOUS SPACE

I made my decision this morning – soon after eight o'clock, as I stood by the front door, ready to drive to the office. All in all, I'm certain that I had no other choice. Yet, given that this is the most important decision of my life, it seems strange that nothing has changed. I expected the walls to tremble, at the very least a subtle shift in the perspectives of these familiar rooms.

In a sense, the lack of any response reflects the tranquil air of this London suburb. If I were living, not in Croydon but in the Bronx or West Beirut, my action would be no more than sensible local camouflage. Here it runs counter to every social value, but is invisible to those it most offends.

Even now, three hours later, all is calm. The leafy avenue is as unruffled as ever. The mail has arrived, and sits unopened on the hall stand. From the dining-room window I watch the British Telecom engineer return to his van after repairing the Johnsons' telephone, an instrument reduced to a nervous wreck at least twice a month by their teenage daughters. Mrs Johnson, dressed in her turquoise track-suit, closes the gate and glances at my car. A faint vapour rises from the exhaust. The engine is still idling, all these hours after I began to demist the windscreen before finishing my breakfast.

This small slip may give the game away. Watching the car impatiently, I am tempted to step from the house and switch off the ignition, but I manage to control myself. Whatever happens, I must hold to my decision and all the consequences that flow from it. Fortunately, an Air India 747 ambles across the sky, searching none too strenuously for London Airport. Mrs Johnson, who shares something of its heavy-bodied elegance, gazes up at the droning turbo-fans. She is dreaming of Martinique or Mauritius, while I am dreaming of nothing.

My decision to dream that dream may have been made this morning, but I assume that its secret logic had begun to run through my life many months ago. Some unknown source of strength sustained me through the unhappy period of my car accident, convalescence and divorce, and the unending problems that faced me at the merchant bank on my return. Standing by the front door after finishing my coffee, I watched the mist clear from the Volvo's windscreen. The briefcase in my hand reminded me of the day-long meetings of the finance committee at which I would have to argue once again for the budget of my beleaguered research department.

Then, as I set the burglar alarm, I realised that I could change the course

of my life by a single action. To shut out the world, and solve all my difficulties at a stroke, I had the simplest of weapons – my own front door. I needed only to close it, and decide never to leave my house again.

Of course, this decision involved more than becoming a mere stay-at-home. I remember walking into the kitchen, surprised by this sudden show of strength, and trying to work out the implications of what I had done. Still wearing my business suit and tie, I sat at the kitchen table, and tapped out my declaration of independence on the polished formica.

By closing the front door I intended to secede not only from the society around me. I was rejecting my friends and colleagues, my accountant, doctor and solicitor, and above all my ex-wife. I was breaking off all practical connections with the outside world. I would never again step through the front door. I would accept the air and the light, and the electric power and water that continued to flow through the meters. But otherwise I would depend on the outside world for nothing. I would eat only whatever food I could find within the house. After that I would rely on time and space to sustain me.

The Volvo's engine is still running. It is 3 p.m., seven hours after I first switched on the ignition, but I can't remember when I last filled the tank. It's remarkable how few passers-by have noticed the puttering exhaust – only the retired headmaster who patrols the avenue morning and afternoon actually stopped to stare at it. I watched him mutter to himself and shake his walking-stick before shuffling away.

The murmur of the engine unsettles me, like the persistent ringing of the telephone. I can guess who is calling: Brenda, my secretary; the head of marketing, Dr Barnes; the personnel manager, Mr Austen (I have already been on sick-leave for three weeks); the dental receptionist (a tender root canal reminds me that I had an appointment yesterday); my wife's solicitor, insisting that the first of the separation payments is due in six months' time.

Finally I pick up the telephone cable and pull the jack on this persistent din. Calming myself, I accept that I will admit to the house anyone with a legitimate right to be there – the TV rental man, the gas and electricity meter-readers, even the local police. I cannot expect to be left completely on my own. At the same time, it will be months before my action arouses any real suspicions, and I am confident that by then I will long since have moved into a different realm.

I feel tremendously buoyant, almost lightheaded. Nothing matters any more. Think only of essentials: the physics of the gyroscope, the flux of photons, the architecture of very large structures.

Five p.m. Time to take stock and work out the exact resources of this house in which I have lived for seven years.

First, I carry my unopened mail into the dining room, open a box of

matches and start a small, satisfying fire in the grate. To the flames I add the contents of my briefcase, all the bank-notes in my wallet, credit cards, driving licence and cheque-book.

I inspect the kitchen and pantry shelves. Before leaving, Margaret had stocked the freezer and refrigerator with a fortnight's supply of eggs, ham and other bachelor staples – a pointed gesture, bearing in mind that she was about to sail off into the blue with her lover (a tedious sales manager). These basic rations fulfil the same role as the keg of fresh water and sack of flour left at the feet of a marooned sailor, a reminder of the world rejecting him.

I weigh the few cartons of pasta in my hand, the jars of lentils and rice, the tomatoes and courgettes, the rope of garlic. Along with the tinned anchovies and several sachets of smoked salmon in the freezer, there are enough calories and protein to keep me going for at least ten days, three times that period if I ration myself. After that I will have to boil the cardboard boxes into a nutritious broth and rely on the charity of the wind.

At 6.15 the car's engine falters and stops.

In every way I am marooned, but a reductive Crusoe paring away exactly those elements of bourgeois life which the original Robinson so dutifully reconstituted. Crusoe wished to bring the Croydons of his own day to life again on his island. I want to expel them, and find in their place a far richer realm formed from the elements of light, time and space.

The first week has ended peacefully. All is well, and I have stabilised my regime most pleasantly. To my surprise, it has been remarkably easy to reject the world. Few people have bothered me. The postman has delivered several parcels, which I carry straight to the dining-room fireplace. On the third day my secretary, Brenda, called at the front door. I smiled winningly, reassured her that I was merely taking an extended sabbatical. She looked at me in her sweet but shrewd way – she had been strongly supportive during both my divorce and the crisis at the office – and then left with a promise to keep in touch. A succession of letters has arrived from Dr Barnes, but I warm my hands over them at the fireplace. The dining-room grate has become an efficient incinerator in which I have erased my entire past – passport; birth, degree and share certificates; uncashed traveller's cheques and 2000 French Francs left from our last unhappy holiday in Nice; letters from my broker and orthopaedic surgeon. Documents of a dead past, they come to life briefly in the flame, and then write themselves into the dust.

Eliminating this detritus has kept me busy. I have pulled down the heavy curtains that hung beside the windows. Light has flooded into the rooms, turning every wall and ceiling into a vivid tabula rasa. Margaret had taken with her most of the ornaments and knickknacks, and the rest I have heaved into a cupboard. Suffused with light, the house can breathe. Upstairs the windows are open to the sky. The rooms seem larger and less confined,

as if they too have found freedom. I sleep well, and when I wake in the morning I almost feel myself on some Swiss mountain-top, with half the sky below me.

Without doubt, I am very much better. I have put away the past, a zone that I regret ever entering. I enjoy the special ease that comes from no longer depending on anyone else, however well-intentioned.

Above all, I am no longer dependent on myself. I feel no obligation to that person who fed and groomed me, who provided me with expensive clothes, who drove me about in his motor-car, who furnished my mind with intelligent books and exposed me to interesting films and art exhibitions. Wanting none of these, I owe that person, myself, no debts. I am free at last to think only of the essential elements of existence – the visual continuum around me, and the play of air and light. The house begins to resemble an advanced mathematical surface, a three-dimensional chessboard. The pieces have yet to be placed, but I feel them forming in my mind.

A policeman is approaching the house. A uniformed constable, he has stepped from a patrol car parked by the gate. He looks up at the roof, watched by an elderly couple who seem to have summoned him.

Confused, I debate whether to answer the doorbell. My arms and shirt are streaked with soot from the fireplace.

'Mr Ballantyne –?' A rather naïve young constable is looking me up and down. 'Are you the householder?'

'Can I help you, officer?' I assume the convincing pose of a law-abiding suburbanite, interrupted in that act of lay worship, do-it-yourself.

'We've had reports of a break-in, sir. Your upstairs windows have been open all night – for two or three nights, your neighbours say. They thought you might be away.'

'A break-in?' This throws me. 'No, I've been here. In fact, I'm not planning to go out at all. I'm cleaning the chimneys, officer, getting rid of all that old soot and dust.'

'Fair enough . . .' He hesitates before leaving, nose roving about for some irregularity he has sniffed, like a dog convinced of a hidden treat. He is certain that in some reprehensible way I am exploiting the suburban norms, like a wife-beater or child-molester.

I wait until he drives away, disappearing into that over-worked hologram called reality. Afterwards I lean against the door, exhausted by this false alarm. The effort of smiling at the officer reminds me of the interior distance I have travelled in the past week. But I must be careful, and hide behind those façades of conventional behaviour that I intend to subvert.

I close the windows that face the street, and then step with relief into the open bedrooms above the garden. The walls form sections of huge box-antennae tuned to the light. I think of the concrete inclines of the old racing track at Brooklands, and the giant chambers excavated from

the bauxite cliffs at Les Baux, where Margaret first began to distance herself from me.

Of course a break-in has occurred, of a very special kind.

A month has passed, a period of many advances and a few setbacks. Resting in the kitchen beside the empty refrigerator, I eat the last of the anchovies and take stock of myself. I have embarked on a long internal migration, following a route partly inscribed within my head and partly within this house, which is a far more complex structure than I realised. I have a sense that there are more rooms than there appear to be at first sight. There is a richness of interior space of which I was totally unaware during the seven years I spent here with Margaret. Light floods everything, expanding the dimensions of walls and ceiling. These quiet streets were built on the site of the old Croydon aerodrome, and it is almost as if the perspectives of the former grass runways have returned to haunt these neat suburban lawns and the minds of those who tend them.

All this excitement has led me to neglect my rationing system. Scarcely anything is left in the pantry – a box of sugar cubes, a tube of tomato paste, and a few shrivelled asparagus tips. I lick my fingers and run them round the bottom of the empty bread bin. Already I find myself wishing that I had fully provisioned myself before embarking on this expedition. But everything I have achieved, the huge sense of freedom, of opened doors and of other doors yet to be opened, were contingent on my acting upon that decision of a moment.

Even so, I have to be careful not to give the game away. I maintain a reasonably kempt appearance, wave from the upstairs windows at Mrs Johnson and gesture apologetically at the overgrown lawn. She understands – I have been abandoned by my wife, condemned to the despair of a womanless world. I am hungry all the time, kept going by not much more than cups of sweetened tea. My weight has plunged; I have lost some fifteen pounds and feel permanently lightheaded.

Meanwhile, the outside world continues to bombard me with its irrelevant messages – junk mail, give-away newspapers, and a barrage of letters from Dr Barnes and the personnel department at the bank. They burn with heavy, solemn flames, and I assume that I have been sacked. Brenda called to see me three days ago, still puzzled by my cheerful demeanour. She told me that she had been reassigned, and that my office has been cleared of its files and furniture.

The letter-slot rattles. From the doormat I pick up two leaflets and a plastic envelope, a free sample of a new brand of chocolate. I rip it from the packing, and sink my teeth into the rubbery core, unable to control the saliva that swamps my mouth. I am so overwhelmed by the taste of food that I fail to hear the door-bell chiming. When I open the door I find a smartly dressed woman in tweed suit and hat, presumably some solicitor's wife working as a volunteer almoner for the local hospital.

'Yes? Can I –?' With an effort I recognise her, as I lick the last of the chocolate from my teeth. 'Margaret . . . ?'

'Of course.' She shakes her head, as if this trivial social gaffe explains everything about me. 'Who on earth did you think I was? Are you all right, Geoffrey?'

'Yes, I'm fine. I've been very busy. What are you looking for?' A frightening prospect crosses my mind. 'You don't want to come back . . . ?'

'Good heavens, no. Dr Barnes telephoned me. He said that you'd resigned. I'm surprised.'

'No, I decided to leave. I'm working on a private project. It's what I've always wanted to do.'

'I know.' Her eyes search the hall and kitchen, convinced that something has changed. 'By the way, I've paid the electricity bill, but this is the last time.'

'Fair enough. Well, I must get back to work.'

'Good.' She is clearly surprised by my self-sufficiency. 'You've lost weight. It suits you.'

The house relaxes its protective hold on me. When Margaret has gone I reflect on how quickly I have forgotten her. There are no tugs of old affection. I have changed, my senses tuned to all the wave-lengths of the invisible. Margaret has remained in a more limited world, one of a huge cast of repertory players in that everlasting provincial melodrama called ordinary life.

Eager to erase her memory, I set off upstairs, and open the windows to enjoy the full play of afternoon sun. The west-facing rooms above the garden have become giant observatories. The dust cloaks everything with a mescalin haze of violet light, photons backing up as they strike the surface of window-sill and dressing-table. Margaret has taken many pieces of furniture with her, leaving unexpected gaps and intervals, as if this is a reversed spatial universe, the template of the one we occupied together. I can almost sit down in her absent William Morris chair, nearly see myself reflected in the missing art deco mirror whose chromium rim has left a halo on the bathroom wall.

A curious discovery – the rooms *are* larger. At first I thought that this was an illusion brought about by the sparse furnishings, but the house has always been bigger than I realised. My eyes now see everything as it is, uncluttered by the paraphernalia of conventional life, as in those few precious moments when one returns from holiday and sees one's home in its true light.

Dazed by the vivid air, I blunder into Margaret's bedroom. The walls are strangely displaced, as if a team of scene-shifters have pulled them back to create a new stage set. There is no sign of the bed, and its bare mattress marked by the wine I spilled on the evening of her departure while commiserating over her dull lover. I have strayed into an unfamiliar area of the room, somewhere between Margaret's bathroom and the fitted

cupboards. The remainder of the room sheers away from me, the walls pushed back by the light. For the first time I see the bed, but it seems as remote as an old divan at the rear of an empty warehouse.

Another door leads to a wide and silent corridor, clearly unentered for years. There is no staircase, but far away there are entrances to other rooms, filled with the sort of light that glows from X-ray viewing screens. Here and there an isolated chair sits against a wall, in one immense room there is nothing but a dressing table, in another the gleaming cabinet of a grandfather clock presides over the endlessly carpeted floor.

The house is revealing itself to me in the most subtle way. Surprised by its perspectives, I trip over my own feet and feel my heart race ahead of me. I find a wall and press my hands to the striped paper, then fumble through the overlit air towards the landing. At last I reach the top of a huge staircase, whose banisters shrink together as I race to the safety of the floor below.

The true dimensions of this house may be exhilarating to perceive, but from now on I will sleep downstairs. Time and space are not necessarily on my side.

I have trapped a cat. So unnerved was I by the experience of losing myself in my own home that it takes me half an hour to realise that I have a small companion, Mrs Johnson's white Persian. While I was blundering around the Marienbad Palace that now occupies the first floor the cat entered the sitting room through the open french window, and was trapped when a gust of air closed the door.

She follows me around amiably, waiting to be fed, but for once I am in need of her charity.

Two months have now passed. This conventional suburban villa is in fact the junction between our small illusory world and another larger and more real one. Miraculously, I have survived, though my last reserves of food were exhausted weeks ago. As I expected, Margaret paid a second and final visit. Still puzzled by my self-confidence and handsomely slimming figure, she told me that she would no longer be responsible for my mounting debts. I bade her farewell, and returned to my lunch of poodle pie.

The thought that I would never see Margaret again gave my modest meal an added relish, and afterwards I carefully set the dog-trap by the open door of the sitting room. The untended garden with its knee-deep grass has attracted my neighbours' pets, trusting beasts who trundle happily towards me as I sit smiling in the armchair, cleaver concealed within an inviting cushion. By the time their ever-hopeful owners call round a few days later I have safely consigned the bones to the space below the dining-room floorboards, a substantial ossuary that is the last resting-place of Bonzo, Major, Yorky and Mr Fred.

These dogs and cats, and the few birds I have been able to trap, soon formed my sole fare. However, it became clear that my neighbours were keeping a more careful eye on their pets, and I resigned myself to a diet

of air. Fortunately, the television rental company intervened to provide a generous source of extra rations.

I remember the dour young man with the tool-kit who arrived to dismantle the attic aerial. He had made several earlier calls in the avenue, and had parked his van a hundred yards away. I followed him up the stairs, concerned that he too might lose his way among those vast rooms.

Sadly, my attempt to warn him came to nothing. As he stepped into the first of those white chambers, as large as aircraft hangars carved in the roof of an iceberg, he seemed to realise that he had entered a zone of danger. I grappled with him as we blundered through that white world, like arctic explorers losing all sense of distance within a few steps of their tent. An hour later, when I had calmed his fears and carried him down the staircase, he had sadly yielded to the terrors of light and space.

Three months – a period of continued discovery and few interruptions. The outside world has at last decided to leave me alone. I no longer answer the door, and there has been scarcely a caller, though threatening letters arrive from the local council, and from the water and electricity companies. But an unshakable logic is at work, and I am confident that my project will be complete before the power and water supplies are disconnected.

The house enlarges itself around me. The invasion of light which revealed its true dimensions has now reached the ground floor. To keep my bearings I have been forced to retreat into the kitchen, where I have moved my mattress and blankets. Now and then I venture into the hall and search the looming perspectives. It amazes me that Margaret and I once lived in this vast pile and so reduced it in our minds.

Already I can feel the walls of the kitchen distancing themselves from me. I spend all day here, sitting on the floor against the freezer cabinet. The cooker, refrigerator and dishwasher have become anonymous objects in some remote department store display. How much longer can this expansion continue? Sooner or later the process will halt, at that moment revealing the true dimensions of the world we inhabit, and which the visual centres of our timid brains have concealed from us. I am on the verge of a unique revelation, the equal perhaps of Columbus's discovery of the new world. I can scarcely wait to bring the news to my neighbours – the modest villa which Mrs Johnson imagines herself to occupy is in fact an immense Versailles!

Near by, the bones of the TV repairman lie on the yellow linoleum like the ribs and skull of a long-decayed desert traveller.

Somewhere a door is being forced. I listen to the grating of keys testing a lock, then the sound of heels on the patio steps before a second attempt to prise open the french window.

Rousing myself, I sway across the kitchen, trying to steady my arms against the faraway washing machine. A key turns, and a door opens somewhere beyond the great carpeted perspectives of the sitting room.

A young woman has entered the house. As she returns the keys to her handbag I recognise Brenda, my former secretary. She stares at the dismantled dog-traps beside the window and then peers around the room, at last seeing me as I watch her beside the door.

'Mr Ballantyne? I'm sorry to break in. I was worried that you might . . .' She smiles reassuringly and takes the keys from her handbag. 'Mrs Ballantyne said I could use the spare set. You haven't answered the phone, and we wondered if you'd fallen ill . . .'

She is walking towards me, but so slowly that the immense room seems to carry her away from me in its expanding dimensions. She approaches and recedes from me at the same time, and I am concerned that she will lose herself in the almost planetary vastness of this house.

Catching her as she swerves past me, I protect her from the outward rush of time and space.

I assume that we have entered the fourth month. I can no longer see the calendar on the kitchen door, so remote is it from me. I am sitting with my back to the freezer, which I have moved out of the kitchen into the pantry. But already the walls of this once tiny room constitute a universe of their own. The ceiling is so distant that clouds might form below it.

I have eaten nothing for the past week, but I no longer dare to leave the pantry and rarely venture more than a step from my position. I could easily lose my way crossing the kitchen and never be able to return to the only security and companionship that I know.

There is only one further retreat. So much space has receded from me that I must be close to the irreducible core where reality lies. This morning I gave in briefly to the sudden fear that all this has been taking place within my own head. By shutting out the world my mind may have drifted into a realm without yardsticks or sense of scale. For so many years I have longed for an empty world, and may unwittingly have constructed it within this house. Time and space have rushed in to fill the vacuum that I created. It even occurred to me to end the experiment, and I stood up and tried to reach the front door, a journey that seemed as doomed as Scott's return from the South Pole. Needless to say, I was forced to give up the attempt long before crossing the threshold of the hall.

Behind me Brenda lies comfortably, her face only a few inches from my own. But now she too is beginning to move away from me. Covered by a jewelled frost, she rests quietly in the compartment of the freezer, a queen waiting one day to be reborn from her cryogenic sleep.

The perspective lines flow from me, enlarging the interior of the compartment. Soon I will lie beside her, in a palace of ice that will crystallise around us, finding at last the still centre of the world which came to claim me.

1989

THE LARGEST THEME PARK IN THE WORLD

The creation of a united Europe, so long desired and so bitterly contested, had certain unexpected consequences. The fulfilment of this age-old dream was a cause of justified celebration, of countless street festivals, banquets and speeches of self-congratulation. But the Europe which had given birth to the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, to modern science and the industrial revolution, had one last surprise up its sleeve.

Needless to say, nothing of this was apparent in 1993. The demolition of so many fiscal and bureaucratic barriers to trade led directly to the goal of a Europe at last united in a political and cultural federation. In 1995, the headiest year since 1968, the necessary legislation was swiftly passed by a dozen parliaments, which dissolved themselves and assigned their powers to the European Assembly at Strasbourg. So there came into being the new Europe, a visionary realm that would miraculously fuse the spirits of Charlemagne and the smart card, Michelangelo and the Club Med, St Augustine and Saint Laurent.

Happily exhausted by their efforts, the new Europeans took off for the beaches of the Mediterranean, their tribal mating ground. Blessed by a benevolent sun and a greenhouse sky, the summer of 1995 ran from April to October. A hundred million Europeans basked on the sand, leaving behind little more than an army of caretakers to supervise the museums, galleries and cathedrals. Excited by the idea of a federal Europe, a vast influx of tourists arrived from the United States, Japan and the newly liberated nations of the Soviet bloc. Guide-books in hand, they gorged themselves on the culture and history of Europe, which had now achieved its spiritual destiny of becoming the largest theme park in the world.

Sustained by these tourist revenues, the ecu soared above the dollar and yen, even though offices and factories remained deserted from Athens to the Atlantic. Indeed, it was only in the autumn of 1995 that the economists at Brussels resigned themselves to the paradox which no previous government had accepted – contrary to the protestant ethic, which had failed so lamentably in the past, the less that Europe worked the more prosperous and contented it became. Delighted to prove this point, the millions of vacationing Europeans on the beaches of the Mediterranean scarcely stirred from their sun-mattresses. Autoroutes and motorways were silent, and graphs of industrial production remained as flat as the cerebral functions of the brain-dead.

An even more significant fact soon emerged. Most of the vacationing

Europeans had extended their holidays from two to three months, but a substantial minority had decided not to return at all. Along the beaches of the Costa del Sol and Côte d'Azur, thousands of French, British and German tourists failed to catch their return flights from the nearby airport. Instead, they remained in their hotels and apartments, lay beside their swimming pools and dedicated themselves to the worship of their own skins.

At first this decision to stay was largely confined to the young and unmarried, to former students and the traditional lumpen-intelligentsia of the beach. But these latter-day refuseniks soon included lawyers, doctors and accountants. Even families with children chose to remain on perpetual holiday. Ignoring the telegrams and phone calls from their anxious employers in Amsterdam, Paris and Düsseldorf, they made polite excuses, applied sun oil to their shoulders and returned to their sail-boats and pedalos. It became all too clear that in rejecting the old Europe of frontiers and national self-interest they had also rejected the bourgeois values that hid behind them. A demanding occupation, a high disposable income, a future mortgaged to the gods of social and professional status, had all been abandoned.

At any event, a movement confined to a few resorts along the Mediterranean coast had, by November 1995, involved tens of thousands of holidaymakers. Those who returned home did so with mixed feelings. By the spring of 1996 more than a million expatriates had settled in permanent exile among the hotels and apartment complexes of the Mediterranean.

By summer this number vastly increased, and brought with it huge demographic and psychological changes. So far, the effects of the beach exodus on the European economy had been slight. Tourism and the sale of large sections of industry to eager Japanese corporations had kept the ecu afloat. As for the exiles in Minorca, Mykonos and the Costa Brava, the cost of living was low and basic necessities few. The hippies and ex-students turned to petty theft and slept on the beach. The lawyers and accountants were able to borrow from their banks when their own resources ran out, offering their homes and businesses as collateral. Wives sold their jewellery, and elderly relatives were badgered into small loans.

Fortunately, the sun continued to shine through the numerous ozone windows and the hottest summer of the century was widely forecast. The determination of the exiles never to return to their offices and factories was underpinned by a new philosophy of leisure and a sense of what constituted a worthwhile life. The logic of the annual beach holiday, which had sustained Europe since the Second World War, had merely been taken to its conclusion. Crime and delinquency were non-existent and the social and racial tolerance of those reclining in adjacent poolside chairs was virtually infinite.

Was Europe about to lead the world in another breakthrough for the third millennium? A relaxed and unpuritan sexual regime now flourished and there was a new-found pride in physical excellence. A host of sporting

activities took place, there were classes in judo and karate, aerobics and tai-chi. The variety of fringe philosophies began to rival those of California. The first solar cults emerged on the beaches of Torremolinos and St Tropez. Where once the Mediterranean coast had been Europe's Florida, a bland parade of marinas and hotels, it was now set to be its Venice Beach, a hot-house of muscle-building and millennial dreams.

In the summer of 1996 the first challenge occurred to this regime of leisure. By now the beach communities comprised some five million exiles, and their financial resources were exhausted. Credit cards had long been cancelled, bank accounts frozen, and governments in Paris, London and Bonn waited for the return of the expatriates to their desks and work-benches.

Surprisingly, the determination of the beach communities never wavered. Far from catching their long-delayed return flights, the exiles decided to hold on to their place in the sun. Soon this brought them into direct conflict with local hoteliers and apartment owners, who found themselves housing a huge population of non-paying guests. The police were called in, and the first open riots occurred on the beaches of Malaga, Menton and Rimini.

The exiles, however, were difficult to dislodge. A year of sun and exercise had turned them into a corps of superb athletes, for whom the local shopkeepers, waiters and hoteliers were no match. Gangs of muscular young women, expert in the martial arts, roamed the supermarkets of Spain and the Côte d'Azur, fearlessly helping themselves from the shelves. Acts of open intimidation quickly subdued the managers of hotels and apartment houses.

Local police chiefs, for their part, were reluctant to intervene, for fear of damaging the imminent summer tourist trade. The lawyers and accountants among the exiles, all far more educated and intelligent than their provincial rivals, were adept at challenging any eviction orders or charges of theft. The once passive regime of sun and sand had given way to a more militant mood, sustained by the exiles' conviction in the moral and spiritual rightness of their cause. Acting together, they commandeered any empty villas or apartment houses, whose owners were either too terrified to protest or fled the scene altogether.

The cult of physical perfection had gripped everyone's imagination. Bodies deformed by years bent over the word-processor and fast-food counter were now slim and upright, as ideally proportioned as the figures on the Parthenon frieze. The new evangelism concealed behind the exercise and fitness fads of the 1980s now reappeared. A devotion to physical perfection ruled their lives more strictly than any industrial taskmaster.

Out of necessity, leisure had moved into a more disciplined phase. At dawn the resort beaches of the Mediterranean were filled with companies of martial art enthusiasts, kicking and grunting in unison. Brigades of handsomely tanned men and women drilled together as they faced the

sun. No longer did they devote their spare time to lying on the sand, but to competitive sports and fiercely contested track events.

Already the first community leaders had emerged from the strongest and most charismatic of the men and women. The casual anarchy of the earliest days had given way to a sensible and cooperative democracy, where members of informal beach groups had voted on their best course of action before seizing an empty hotel or raiding a wine-store. But this democratic phase had failed to meet the needs and emotions of the hour, and the beach communities soon evolved into more authoritarian form.

The 1996 holiday season brought a welcome respite and millions of new recruits, whose purses were bulging with ecus. When they arrived at Marbella, Ibiza, La Grande Motte and Sestri Levante they found themselves eagerly invited to join the new beach communities. By August 1996, when almost the whole of Europe had set off for the coasts of the sun, the governments of its member countries were faced with the real possibility that much of their populations would not return. Not only would offices and factories be closed forever, but there would be no one left to man the museums and galleries, to collect the dollars, yen and roubles of the foreign tourists who alone sustained their economies. The prospect appeared that the Louvre and Buckingham Palace might be sold to a Japanese hotel corporation, that Chartres and Cologne cathedrals would become subsidiaries of the Disney Company.

Forced to act, the Strasbourg Assembly dispatched a number of task forces to the south. Posing as holidaymakers, teams of investigators roamed the cafés and swimming pools. But the pathetic attempts of these bikini bureaucrats to infiltrate and destabilise the beach enclaves came to nothing, and many defected to the ranks of the exiles.

So at last, in October 1996, the Strasbourg Assembly announced that the beaches of the Mediterranean were closed, that all forms of exercise outside the workplace or the bedroom were illegal, and that the suntan was a prohibited skin embellishment. Lastly, the Assembly ordered its 30 million absent citizens to return home.

Needless to say, these commands were ignored. The beach people who occupied the linear city of the Mediterranean coast, some 3,000 miles long and 300 metres wide, were now a very different breed. The police and gendarmerie who arrived at the coastal resorts found militant bands of body-worshippers who had no intention of resuming their previous lives.

Aware that a clash with the authorities would take place, they had begun to defend their territory, blockading the beach roads with abandoned cars, fortifying the entrances to hotels and apartment houses. By day their scuba teams hunted the coastal waters for fish, while at night raiding parties moved inland, stealing sheep and looting the fields of their vegetable crops. Large sections of Malaga, St Tropez and Corfu were now occupied by exiles, while many of the smaller resorts such as Rosas and Formentera were wholly under their control.

The first open conflict, at Golfe-Juan, was typically short-lived and indecisive. Perhaps unconsciously expecting the Emperor to come ashore, as he had done after his escape from Elba, the police were unable to cope with the militant brigade of bronzed and naked mothers, chanting green and feminist slogans, who advanced towards their water-cannon. Commandos of dentists and architects, releasing their fiercest karate kicks, strutted through the narrow streets in what seemed to be a display of a new folk tradition, attracting unmanageable crowds of American and Japanese tourists from their Cannes hotels. At Port-Vendres, Sitges, Bari and Fréjus the police fell back in confusion, unable to distinguish between the exiles and authentic visiting holidaymakers.

When the police returned in force, supported by units of the army, their arrival only increased the determination of the beach people. The polyglot flavour of the original settlers had given way to a series of national groups recruiting their members from their traditional resorts – the British at Torremolinos, Germans at Rosas, French at Juan les Pins. The resistance within these enclaves reflected their national identity – a rabble of drunken British hooligans roamed the streets of Torremolinos, exposing their fearsome buttocks to the riot police. The Germans devoted themselves to hard work and duty, erecting a Siegfried Line of sand bunkers around the beaches of Rosas, while the massed nipples of Juan were more than enough to hopelessly dazzle the gendarmerie.

In return, each of these national enclaves produced its characteristic leaders. The British resorts were dominated by any number of would-be Thatchers, fierce ladies in one-piece bathing suits who invoked the memory of Churchill and proclaimed their determination to 'fight them on the beaches and never, *never* surrender'. Gaullist throwbacks spoke loftily of the grandeur of French sun and sand, while the Italians proclaimed their 'mare nostrum'.

But above all the tone of these beach-führers was uniformly authoritarian. The sometime holiday exiles now enjoyed lives of fierce self-discipline coupled with a mystical belief in the powers of physical strength. Athletic prowess was admired above all, a cult of bodily perfection mediated through group gymnastic displays on the beaches, quasi-fascistic rallies, in which thousands of well-drilled participants slashed the dawn air with their karate chops and chanted in a single voice at the sun. These bronzed and handsome figures with their thoughtless sexuality looked down on their tourist compatriots with a sense of almost racial superiority.

It was clear that Europe, where so much of western civilisation had originated, had given birth to yet another significant trend, the first totalitarian system based on leisure. From the sun-lounge and the swimming pool, from the gymnasium and disco, had come a nationalistic and authoritarian creed with its roots in the realm of pleasure rather than that of work.

By the spring of 1997, as Brussels fumbled and Strasbourg debated, the

30 million people of the beach were beginning to look north for the first time. They listened to their leaders talking of national living space, of the hordes of alien tourists with their soulless dollars and yen, of the tired blood of their compatriots yearning to be invigorated. As they stood on the beaches of Marbella, Juan, Rimini and Naxos they swung their arms in unison, chanting their exercise songs as they heard the call to march north, expel the invading tourists and reclaim their historic heartlands.

So, in the summer of 1997 they set off along the deserted autoroutes and motorways in the greatest invasion that Europe has ever known, intent on seizing their former homes, determined to reinstate a forgotten Europe of nations, each jealous of its frontiers, happy to guard its history, tariff barriers and insularity.

1989

WAR FEVER

Ryan's dream of a ceasefire first came to him during the battle for the Beirut Hilton. At the time he was scarcely aware of the strange vision of a city at peace that had slipped uninvited into a corner of his head. All day the battle had moved from floor to floor of the ruined hotel, and Ryan had been too busy defending the barricade of restaurant tables in the mezzanine to think of anything else. By the end, when Arkady and Mikhail crept forward to silence the last Royalist sniper in the atrium, Ryan stood up and gave them covering fire, praying all the while for his sister Louisa, who was fighting in another unit of the Christian militia.

Then the firing ceased, and Captain Gomez signalled Ryan to make his way down the staircase to the reception area. Ryan watched the dust falling through the roof of the atrium fifteen floors above him. Illuminated by the sunlight, the pulverised cement formed a fleeting halo that cascaded towards the replica of a tropical island in the centre of the atrium. The miniature lagoon was filled with rubble, but a few tamarinds and exotic ferns survived among the furniture thrown down from the upper balconies. For a moment this derelict paradise was lit by the dust, like a stage set miraculously preserved in the debris of a bombed theatre. Ryan gazed at the fading halo, thinking that one day, perhaps, all the dust of Beirut would descend like the dove, and at last silence the guns.

But the halo served a more practical purpose. As Ryan followed Captain Gomez down the staircase he saw the two enemy militia men scrambling across the floor of the lagoon, their wet uniforms clearly visible against the chalky cement. Then he and Gomez were firing at the trapped soldiers, shredding the tamarinds into matchwood long after the two youths lay bloodily together in the shallow water. Possibly they had been trying to surrender, but the newsreels of Royalist atrocities shown on television the previous evening put paid to that hope. Like the other young fighters, Ryan killed with a will.

Even so, as after all the battles in Beirut that summer, Ryan felt dazed and numbed when it was over. He could almost believe that he too had died. The other members of his platoon were propping the five bodies against the reception counter, where they could be photographed for the propaganda leaflets to be scattered over the Royalist strongholds in South Beirut. Trying to focus his eyes, Ryan stared at the roof of the atrium, where the last wisps of dust were still falling from the steel girders.

'Ryan! What is it?' Dr Edwards, the United Nations medical observer,

took Ryan's arm and tried to steady him. 'Did you see someone move up there?'

'No – there's nothing. I'm okay, doctor. There was a strange light . . .'

'Probably one of those new phosphorus shells the Royalists are using. A fiendish weapon, we're hoping to get them banned.'

With a grimace of anger, Dr Edwards put on his battered UN helmet. Ryan was glad to see this brave, if slightly naïve man, in some ways more like an earnest young priest than a doctor, who spent as much time in the Beirut front line as any of the combatants. Dr Edwards could easily have returned to his comfortable New England practice, but he chose to devote himself to the men and women dying in a forgotten civil war half a world away. The seventeen-year-old Ryan had struck up a close friendship with Dr Edwards, and brought to him all his worries about his sister and aunt, and even his one-sided passion for Lieutenant Valentina, the strong-willed commander of the Christian guard-post at the telephone exchange.

Dr Edwards was always caring and sympathetic, and Ryan often exploited the physician's good nature, milking him for advance news of any shift in military alliances which the UN peacekeeping force had detected. Sometimes Ryan worried that Dr Edwards had spent too long in Beirut. He had become curiously addicted to the violence and death, as if tending the wounded and dying satisfied some defeatist strain in his character.

'Let's have a look at the poor devils.' He led Ryan towards the soldiers propped against the reception counter, their weapons and personal letters arranged at their feet in a grim tableau. 'With any luck, we'll find their next of kin.'

Ryan pushed past Captain Gomez, who was muttering over his uncooperative camera. He knelt beside the youngest of the dead soldiers, a teenager with dark eyes and cherubic face, wearing the bulky camouflage jacket of the International Brigade.

'Angel . . . ? Angel Porrua . . . ?' Ryan touched the spongy cheeks of the fifteen-year-old Spaniard, with whom he often went swimming at the beaches of East Beirut. Only the previous Sunday they had rigged a makeshift sail on an abandoned dory and cruised half a mile up the coast before being turned back by the UN naval patrol. He realised that he had last seen Angel scrambling through the waterlogged debris of the artificial lagoon in the atrium. Perhaps he had recognised Ryan on the mezzanine staircase, and had been trying to surrender as he and Captain Gomez opened fire.

'Ryan?' Dr Edwards squatted beside him. 'Do you know him?'

'Angel Porrua – but he's in the Brigade, doctor. They're on our side.'

'Not any more.' Clumsily, Dr Edwards pressed Ryan's shoulder in a gesture of comfort. 'Last night they did a deal with the Royalists. I'm sorry – they've been guilty of real treachery.'

'No, Angel was on our side . . .'

Ryan stood up and left the group of soldiers sharing a six-pack of beer.

He stepped through the dust and rubble to the ornamental island in the centre of the atrium. The bullet-riddled tamarinds still clung to their rockery, and Ryan hoped that they would survive until the first of the winter rains fell through the roof. He looked back at the Royalist dead, sitting like neglected guests who had expired at the reception counter of this hotel, weapons beside them.

But what if the living were to lay down their weapons? Suppose that all over Beirut the rival soldiers were to place their rifles at their feet, along with their identity tags and the photographs of their sisters and sweethearts, each a modest shrine to a ceasefire?

A ceasefire? The phrase scarcely existed in Beirut's vocabulary, Ryan reflected, as he sat in the rear of Captain Gomez's jeep on the return to the Christian sector of the city. Around them stretched the endless vistas of shattered apartment houses and bombed-out office buildings. Many of the stores had been converted into strongpoints, their steel grilles plastered with slogans and posters, crude photographs of murdered women and children.

During the original civil war, thirty years earlier, more than half a million people had lived in Beirut. His own grandparents had been among them, some of the many Americans who had resigned their teaching posts at the schools and university to fight with the beleaguered Christian militia. From all over the world volunteers had been drawn to Beirut, mercenaries and idealists, religious fanatics and out-of-work bodyguards, who fought and died for one or another of the rival factions.

Deep in their bunkers below the rubble they even managed to marry and raise their families. Ryan's parents had been in their teens when they were murdered during the notorious Airport Massacre – in one of the worst of many atrocities, the Nationalist militia had executed their prisoners after promising them safe passage to Cyprus. Only the kindness of an Indian soldier in the UN force had saved Ryan's life – he had found the baby boy and his sister in an abandoned apartment building, and then tracked down their adolescent aunt.

However tragic, Beirut had been worth fighting for, a city with street markets, stores and restaurants. There were churches and mosques filled with real congregations, not heaps of roof-tiles under an open sky. Now the civilian population had gone, leaving a few thousand armed combatants and their families hiding in the ruins. They were fed and supplied by the UN peacekeeping force, who turned a blind eye to the clandestine shipments of arms and ammunition, for fear of favouring one or another side in the conflict.

So a futile war dragged on, so pointless that the world's news media had long since lost interest. Sometimes, in a ruined basement, Ryan came acoss a tattered copy of *Time* or *Paris Match*, filled with photographs of street-fighting and graphic reports on the agony of Beirut, a city then at the centre of the world's concern. Now no one cared, and

only the hereditary militias fought on, grappling across their empires of rubble.

But there was nothing pointless about the bullets. As they passed the shell of the old pro-government radio station there was a single shot from the ground-floor window.

'Pull over, corporal! Get off the road!' Pistol in hand, Gomez wrenched the steering wheel from Arkady and slewed the jeep into the shelter of a derelict bus.

Kneeling beside the flattened rear tyres, Ryan watched the UN spotter plane circle overhead. He waited for Gomez to flush out the sniper, probably a Nationalist fanatic trying to avenge the death of a brother or cousin. The Nationalist militia were based at Beirut Airport, a wilderness of weed-grown concrete on which no plane had landed for ten years, and rarely ventured into the centre of the city.

If a ceasefire was ever to take hold it would be here, somewhere along the old Green Line that divided Beirut, in this no-man's-land between the main power bases – the Christians in north-east Beirut, the Nationalists and Fundamentalists in the south and west, the Royalists and Republicans in the south-east, with the International Brigade clinging to the fringes. But the real map of the city was endlessly redrawn by opportunist deals struck among the local commanders – a jeep bartered for a truckload of tomatoes, six rocket launchers for a video-recorder.

What ransom could buy a ceasefire?

'Wake up, Ryan! Let's move!' Gomez emerged from the radio station with his prisoner, a jittery twelve-year-old in a hand-me-down Nationalist uniform. Gomez held the boy by his matted hair, then flung him into the back of the jeep. 'Ryan, keep an eye on this animal – he bites. We'll take him to interrogation.'

'Right, captain. And if there's anything left we'll trade him for some new videos.'

Hands bound, the boy knelt on the floor of the jeep, weeping openly from fear and rage. Jabbing him with his rifle stock, Ryan was surprised by his own emotions. For all his hopes of a ceasefire, he felt a reflex of real hate for this overgrown child. Hate was what kept the war going. Even Dr Edwards had been infected by it, and he wasn't alone. Ryan had seen the shining eyes of the UN observers as they photographed the latest atrocity victims, or debriefed the survivors of a cruel revenge attack, like prurient priests at confession. How could they put an end to the hate that was corrupting them all? Good God, he himself had begun to resent Angel Porrua for fighting with the Nationalists . . .

That evening Ryan rested on the balcony of Aunt Vera's apartment overlooking the harbour in East Beirut. He watched the riding lights of the UN patrol craft out at sea, and thought about his plans for a ceasefire. Trying to forget the day's fighting and Angel's death, he listened to Louisa

chattering in the kitchen over the sounds of pop music broadcast by a local radio station.

The balcony was virtually Ryan's bedroom – he slept there in a hammock shielded from public view by the washing line and the plywood hutch he had built as a boy for his Dutch rabbit. Ryan could easily have moved to any one of the dozen empty apartments in the building, but he liked the intimacy of family life. The two rooms and kitchen were the only home he had ever known.

A young couple in an apartment across the street had recently adopted an orphan boy, and the sounds of his crying reminded Ryan that he at least was related by blood to the members of his family. In Beirut such blood ties were rare. Few of the young women soldiers ever conceived, and most children were war-orphans, though it puzzled Ryan where all these youngsters came from – somehow a secret family life survived in the basements and shantytowns on the outskirts of the city.

'That's the Rentons' new little son.' His sister strolled onto the balcony, brushing out the waist-long hair that spent its days in a military bun. 'It's a pity he cries a lot.'

'At least he laughs more than he cries.' An intriguing thought occurred to Ryan. 'Tell me, Louisa – will Lieutenant Valentina and I have a child?'

'A child? Did you hear that, Aunty? So what does Valentina think?'

'I've no idea. As it happens, I've never spoken to her.'

'Well, dear, I think you should ask her. She might lose something of her elegant composure.'

'Only for a few seconds. She's very regal.'

'It only takes a few seconds to conceive a child. Or is she so special that she won't even spare you those few seconds?'

'She is very special.'

'Who's this?' Aunt Vera hung their combat jackets over the balcony, gazing at them with almost maternal pride. 'Are you talking about me, Ryan, or your sister?'

'Someone far more special,' Louisa rejoined. 'His dream woman.'

'You two are my dream women.'

This was literally the truth. The possibility that anything might happen to them appalled Ryan. In the street below the balcony a night-commando patrol had lined up and were checking their equipment – machine-pistols, grenades, packs loaded with booby-traps and detonators. They would crawl into the darkness of West Beirut, each a killing machine out to murder some aunt or sister on a balcony.

A UN medical orderly moved down the line, issuing morphine ampoules. For all the lives they saved, Ryan sometimes resented the blue helmets. They nursed the wounded, gave cash and comfort to the bereaved, arranged foster-parents for the orphans, but they were too nervous of taking sides. They ringed the city, preventing anyone from entering or leaving, and in a sense controlled everything that

went on in Beirut. They could virtually bring the war to a halt, but Dr Edwards repeatedly told Ryan that any attempt by the peacekeeping force to live up to its name would lead the world's powers to intervene militarily, for fear of destabilising the whole Middle East. So the fighting went on.

The night-commandos moved away, six soldiers on either side of the street, heading towards the intermittent clatter of gunfire.

'They're off now,' Aunt Vera said. 'Wish them luck.'

'Why?' Ryan asked quietly. 'What for?'

'What do you mean? You're always trying to shock us, Ryan. Don't you want them to come back?'

'Of course. But why leave in the first place? They could stay here.'

'That's crazy talk.' His sister placed a hand on Ryan's forehead, feeling for a temperature. 'You had a hard time in the Hilton, Arkady told me. Remember what we're fighting for.'

'I'm trying. Today I helped to kill Angel Porrua. What was he fighting for?'

'Are you serious? We're fighting for what we believe.'

'But nobody believes anything! Think about it, Louisa. The Royalists don't want the king, the Nationalists secretly hope for partition, the Republicans want to do a deal with the Crown Prince of Monaco, the Christians are mostly atheists, and the Fundamentalists can't agree on a single fundamental. We're fighting and dying for nothing.'

'So?' Louisa pointed with her brush to the UN observers by their post. 'That just leaves them. What do they believe in?'

'Peace. World harmony. An end to fighting everywhere.'

'Then maybe you should join them.'

'Yes . . .' Ryan pushed aside his combat jacket and stared through the balcony railings. Each of the blue helmets was a pale lantern in the dusk. 'Maybe we should all join the UN. Yes, Louisa, everyone should wear the blue helmet.'

And so a dream was born.

During the next days Ryan began to explore this simple but revolutionary idea. Though gripped by the notion, he knew that it was difficult to put into practice. His sister was sceptical, and the fellow-members of his platoon were merely baffled by the concept.

'I see what you're getting at,' Arkady admitted as they shared a cigarette in the Green Line command bunker. 'But if everyone joins the UN who will be left to do the fighting?'

'Arkady, that's the whole point . . .' Ryan was tempted to give up. 'Just think of it. Everything will be neat and clean again. There'll be no more patrols, no parades or weapons drills. We'll lie around in the McDonald's eating hamburgers; there'll be discos every night. People will be walking around the streets, going into stores, sitting in cafés . . .'

'That sounds really weird,' Arkady commented.

'It isn't weird. Life will start again. It's how it used to be, like it is now in other places around the world.'

'Where?'

'Well . . .' This was a difficult one. Like the other fighters in Beirut, Ryan knew next to nothing about the outside world. No newspapers came in, and foreign TV and radio broadcasts were jammed by the signals teams of the rival groups to prevent any foreign connivance in a military coup. Ryan had spent a few years in the UN school in East Beirut, but his main source of information about the larger world was the forty-year-old news magazines that he found in abandoned buildings. These presented a picture of a world at strife, of bitter fighting in Vietnam, Angola and Iran. Presumably these vast conflicts, greater versions of the fighting in Beirut, were still going on.

Perhaps the whole world should wear the blue helmet? This thought excited Ryan. If he could bring about a ceasefire in Beirut the peace movement might spread to Asia and Africa, everyone would lay down their arms . . .

Despite numerous rebuffs Ryan pressed on, arguing his case with any soldiers he met. Always there was an unvoiced interest, but one obstacle was the constant barrage of propaganda – the atrocity posters, the TV newsreels of vandalised churches that played on an ever-ready sense of religious outrage, and a medley of racial and anti-monarchist slanders.

To break this propaganda stranglehold was far beyond Ryan's powers, but by chance he found an unexpectedly potent weapon – humour.

While on duty with a shore patrol by the harbour, Ryan was describing his dream of a better Beirut as his unit passed the UN command post. The observers had left their helmets on the open-air map table, and without thinking Ryan pulled off his khaki forage cap and lowered the blue steel bowl over his head.

'Hey, look at Ryan!' Arkady shouted. There was some good-humoured scuffling until Mikhail and Nazar pulled them apart. 'No more wrestling now, we have our own peacekeeping force!'

Friendly cat-calls greeted Ryan as he paraded up and down in the helmet, but then everyone fell silent. The helmet had a calming effect, Ryan noticed, both on himself and his fellow-soldiers. On an impulse he set off along the beach towards the Fundamentalist sentry-post 500 yards away.

'Ryan – look out!' Mikhail ran after him, but stopped as Captain Gomez rode up in his jeep to the harbour wall. Together they watched as Ryan strode along the shore, ignoring the sniper-infested office buildings. He was halfway to the sentry-post when a Fundamentalist sergeant climbed onto the roof, waving a temporary safe-passage. Too cautious to risk his charmed life, Ryan saluted and turned back.

When he rejoined his platoon everyone gazed at him with renewed respect. Arkady and Nazar were wearing blue helmets, sheepishly ignoring Captain Gomez as he stepped in an ominous way from his jeep. Then Dr Edwards emerged from the UN post, restraining Gomez.

'I'll take care of this, captain. The UN won't press charges. I know Ryan wasn't playing the fool.'

Explaining his project to Dr Edwards was far easier than Ryan had hoped. They sat together in the observation post, as Dr Edwards encouraged him to outline his plan.

'It's a remarkable idea, Ryan.' Clearly gripped by its possibilities, Dr Edwards seemed almost lightheaded. 'I won't say it's going to work, but it deserves a try.'

'The main object is the ceasefire,' Ryan stressed. 'Joining the UN force is just a means to that end.'

'Of course. But do you think they'll wear the blue helmet?'

'A few will, but that's all we need. Little by little, more people will join up. Everyone is sick of fighting, doctor, but there's nothing else here.'

'I know that, Ryan. God knows it's a desperate place.' Dr Edwards reached across the table and held Ryan's wrists, trying to lend him something of his own strength. 'I'll have to take this up with the UN Secretariat in Damascus, so it's vital to get it right. Let's think of it as a volunteer UN force.'

'Exactly. We'll volunteer to wear the blue helmet. That way we don't have to change sides or betray our own people. Eventually, everyone will be in the volunteer force . . .'

'. . . and the fighting will just fade away. It's a great idea, it's only strange that no one has ever thought of it before.' Dr Edwards was watching Ryan keenly. 'Did anyone help you? One of the wounded ex-officers, perhaps?'

'There wasn't anyone, doctor. It just came to me, out of all the death . . .'

Dr Edwards left Beirut for a week, consulting his superiors in Damascus, but in that time events moved more quickly than Ryan had believed possible. Everywhere the militia fighters were sporting the blue helmet. This began as a joke confined to the Christian forces, in part an irreverent gesture at the UN observers. Then, while patrolling the Green Line, Ryan spotted the driver of a Royalist jeep wearing a blue beret. Soon the more carefree spirits, the pranksters in every unit, wore the helmet or beret like a cockade.

'Ryan, look at this.' Captain Gomez called him to the command post in the lobby of the TV station. 'You've got a lot to answer for . . .'

Across the street, near a burnt-out Mercedes, a Royalist guerrilla in a blue beret had set up a canvas chair and card table. He sat back, feet on the table, leisurely taking the sun.

'The nerve of it . . .' Gomez raised Ryan's rifle and trained it at the soldier. He whistled to himself, and then handed the weapon back to Ryan. 'He's lucky, we're over-exposed here. I'll give him his suntan . . .'

This was a breakthrough, and not the last. Clearly there was a deep

undercurrent of fatigue. By the day of Dr Edwards' return, Ryan estimated that one in ten of the militia fighters was wearing the blue helmet or beret. Fire-fights still shook the night sky, but the bursts of gunfire seemed more isolated.

'Ryan, it's scarcely credible,' Dr Edwards told him when they met at the UN post near the harbour. He pointed to the map marked with a maze of boundary lines and fortified positions. 'Today there hasn't been a single major incident along the Green Line. North of the airport there's even a de facto ceasefire between the Fundamentalists and the Nationalists.'

Ryan was staring at the sea, where a party of Christian soldiers were swimming from a diving raft. The UN guard-ships were close inshore, no longer worried about drawing fire. Without meaning to dwell on the past, Ryan said: 'Angel and I went sailing there.'

'And you'll go sailing again, with Nazar and Arkady.' Dr Edwards seized his shoulders. 'Ryan, you've brought off a miracle!'

'Well . . .' Ryan felt unsure of his own emotions, like someone who has just won the largest prize in a lottery. The UN truck parked in the sun was loaded with crates of blue uniforms, berets and helmets. Permission had been granted for the formation of a Volunteer UN Force recruited from the militias. The volunteers would serve in their own platoons, but be unarmed and take no part in any fighting, unless their lives were threatened. The prospect of a permanent peace was at last in sight.

Only six weeks after Ryan had first donned the blue helmet, an unbroken ceasefire reigned over Beirut. Everywhere the guns were silent. Sitting beside Captain Gomez as they toured the city by jeep, Ryan marvelled at the transformation. Unarmed soldiers lounged on the steps of the Hilton, groups of once-bitter enemies fraternised on the terrace of the Parliament building. Shutters were opening on the stores along the Green Line, and there was even a modest street market in the hallway of the Post Office. Children had emerged from their basement hideaways and played among the burnt-out cars. Many of the women guerrillas had exchanged their combat fatigues for bright print dresses, a first taste of the glamour and chic for which the city had once been renowned.

Even Lieutenant Valentina now stalked about in a black leather skirt and vivid lipstick jacket, blue beret worn rakishly over an elegant chignon.

As they passed her command post Captain Gomez stopped the jeep. He doffed his blue helmet in a gesture of respect. 'My God! Isn't that the last word, Ryan?'

'It certainly is, captain,' Ryan agreed devoutly. 'How do I even dare approach her?'

'What?' Gomez followed Ryan's awestruck gaze. 'Not Lieutenant Valentina – she'll eat you for breakfast. I'm talking about the soccer match this afternoon.'

He pointed to the large poster recently pasted over the cracked windows of the nearby Holiday Inn. A soccer match between the Republican and

Nationalist teams would take place at three o'clock in the stadium, the first game in the newly formed Beirut Football League.

'"Tomorrow – Christians versus Fundamentalists. Referee-Colonel Mugabe of the International Brigade." That should be high-scoring . . .' Blue helmet in hand, Gomez climbed from the jeep and strolled over to the poster.

Ryan, meanwhile, was staring at Lieutenant Valentina. Out of uniform she seemed even more magnificent, her Uzi machine-pistol slung over her shoulder like a fashion accessory. Taking his courage in both hands, Ryan stepped into the street and walked towards her. She could eat him for breakfast, of course, and happily lunch and supper as well . . .

The lieutenant turned her imperious eyes in his direction, already resigned to the attentions of this shy young man. But before Ryan could speak, an immense explosion erupted from the street behind the TV station. The impact shook the ground and drummed against the pockmarked buildings. Fragments of masonry cascaded into the road as a cloud of smoke seethed into the sky, whipped upwards by the flames that rose from the detonation point somewhere to the south-west of the Christian enclave.

A six-foot scimitar of plate glass fell from the window of the Holiday Inn, slicing through the football poster, and shattered around Gomez's feet. As he ran to the jeep, shouting at Ryan, there was a second explosion from the Fundamentalist sector of West Beirut. Signal flares were falling in clusters over the city, and the first rounds of gunfire competed with the whine of klaxons and the loudspeakers broadcasting a call to arms.

Ryan stumbled to his feet, brushing the dust from his combat jacket. Lieutenant Valentina had vanished into the strongpoint, where her men were already loading the machine-gun in the barbette.

'Captain Gomez . . . The bomb? What set it off?'

'Treachery, Ryan – the Royalists must have done a deal with the Nats.' He pulled Ryan into the jeep, cuffing him over the head. 'All this talk of peace. The oldest trap in the world, and we walked straight into it . . .'

More than treachery, however, had taken place. Armed militia men filled the streets, taking up their positions in the blockhouses and strongpoints. Everyone was shouting at once, voices drowned by the gunfire that came from all directions. Powerful bombs had been cunningly planted to cause maximum confusion, and the nervous younger soldiers were firing into the air to keep up their courage. Signal flares were falling over the city in calculated but mysterious patterns. Everywhere blue helmets and berets were lying discarded in the gutter.

When Ryan reached his aunt's apartment he found Dr Edwards and two UN guards waiting for him.

'Ryan, it's too late. I'm sorry.'

Ryan tried to step past to the staircase, but Dr Edwards held his arms. Looking up at this anxious and exhausted man, Ryan realised that apart

from the UN observers he was probably the only one in Beirut still wearing the blue helmet.

'Dr Edwards, I have to look after Louisa and my aunt. They're upstairs.'

'No, Ryan. They're not here any longer. I'm afraid they've gone.'

'Where? My God, I told them to stay here!'

'They've been taken as hostages. There was a commando raid timed for the first explosion. Before we realised it, they were in and out.'

'Who?' Confused and frightened, Ryan stared wildly at the street, where armed men were forming into their platoons. 'Was it the Royalists, or the Nats?'

'We don't know. It's tragic, already there have been some foul atrocities. But they won't harm Louisa or your aunt. They know who you are.'

'They took them because of *me* . . .' Ryan lifted the helmet from his head. He stared at the blue bowl, which he had carefully polished, trying to make it the brightest in Beirut.

'What do you plan to do, Ryan?' Dr Edwards took the helmet from his hands, a stage prop no longer needed after the last curtain. 'It's your decision. If you want to go back to your unit, we'll understand.'

Behind Dr Edwards one of the observers held Ryan's rifle and webbing. The sight of the weapon and its steel-tipped bullets brought back Ryan's old anger, that vague hatred that had kept them all going for so many years. He needed to go out into the streets, track down the kidnappers, revenge himself on those who had threatened his aunt and Louisa.

'Well, Ryan . . .' Dr Edwards was watching him in a curiously distant way, as if Ryan was a laboratory rat at a significant junction in a maze. 'Are you going to fight?'

'Yes, I'll fight . . .' Ryan placed the blue helmet firmly on his head. 'But not for war. I'll work for another ceasefire, doctor.'

It was then that he found himself facing the raised barrel of his own rifle. An expressionless Dr Edwards took his wrists, but it was some minutes before Ryan realised that he had been handcuffed and placed under arrest.

For an hour they drove south-east through the suburbs of Beirut, past the derelict factories and shantytowns, stopping at the UN checkpoints along the route. From his seat in the back of the armoured van, Ryan could see the ruined skyline of the city. Funnels of smoke leaned across the sky, but the sound of gunfire had faded. Once they stopped to stretch their legs, but Dr Edwards declined to talk to him. Ryan assumed that the physician suspected him of being involved with the conspirators who had broken the ceasefire. Perhaps Dr Edwards imagined that the whole notion of ceasefire had been a devious scheme in which Ryan had exploited his contacts among the young . . . ?

They passed through the second of the perimeter fences that enclosed the city, and soon after approached the gates of a military camp built

beside a deserted sanatorium. A line of olive-green tents covered the spacious grounds. Arrays of radio antennae and television dishes rose from the roof of the sanatorium, all facing north-west towards Beirut.

The van stopped at the largest of the tents, which appeared to house a hospital for wounded guerrillas. But within the cool green interior there was no sign of patients. Instead they were walking through a substantial arsenal. Rows of trestle tables were loaded with carbines and machine-guns, boxes of grenades and mortar bombs. A UN sergeant moved among this mountain of weaponry, marking items on a list like the owner of a gun store checking the day's orders.

Beyond the arsenal was an open area that resembled the newsroom of a television station. A busy staff of UN observers stood beneath a wall map of Beirut, moving dozens of coloured tapes and stars. These marked the latest positions in the battle for the city being screened on the TV monitors beside the map.

'You can leave us, corporal. I'll be in charge of him now.' Dr Edwards took the rifle and webbing from the UN guard, and beckoned Ryan into a canvas-walled office at the end of the tent. Plastic windows provided a clear view into an adjacent room, where two women clerks were rolling copies of a large poster through a printing press. The blown-up photograph of a Republican atrocity, it showed a group of murdered women who had been executed in a basement garage.

Staring at this gruesome image, Ryan guessed why Dr Edwards still avoided his eyes.

'Dr Edwards, I didn't know about the bomb this morning, or the surprise attack. Believe me –'

'I believe you, Ryan. Everything's fine, so try to relax.' He spoke curtly, as if addressing a difficult patient. He laid the rifle on his desk, and released the handcuffs from Ryan's wrists. 'You're out of Beirut for good now. As far as you're concerned, the ceasefire is permanent.'

'But . . . what about my aunt and sister?'

'They've come to no harm. In fact, at this very moment they're being held at the UN post near the Football Stadium.'

'Thank God. I don't know what went wrong. Everyone wanted the ceasefire . . .' Ryan turned from the atrocity posters spilling endlessly through the slim hands of the UN clerks. Pinned to the canvas wall behind Dr Edwards were scores of photographs of young men and women in their combat fatigues, caught unawares near the UN observation posts. In pride of place was a large photograph of Ryan himself. Assembled together, they resembled the inmates of a mental institution.

Two orderlies passed the doorway of the office, wheeling a trolley loaded with assault rifles.

'These weapons, doctor? Are they confiscated?'

'No – as it happens, they're factory-new. They're on their way to the battlefield.'

'So there's more fighting going on outside Beirut . . .' This news was enough to make Ryan despair. 'The whole world's at war.'

'No, Ryan. The whole world is at peace. Except for Beirut – that's where the weapons are going. They'll be smuggled into the city inside a cargo of oranges.'

'Why? That's mad, doctor! The militias will get them!'

'That's the point, Ryan. We want them to have the weapons. And we want them to keep on fighting.'

Ryan began to protest, but Dr Edwards showed him firmly to the chair beside the desk.

'Don't worry, Ryan, I'll explain it all to you. Tell me first, though – have you ever heard of a disease called smallpox?'

'It was some sort of terrible fever. It doesn't exist any more.'

'That's true – almost. Fifty years ago the World Health Organisation launched a huge campaign to eliminate smallpox, one of the worst diseases mankind has ever known, a real killer that destroyed tens of millions of lives. There was a global programme of vaccination, involving doctors and governments in every country. Together they finally wiped it from the face of the earth.'

'I'm glad, doctor – if only we could do the same for war.'

'Well, in a real sense we have, Ryan – almost. In the case of smallpox, people can now travel freely all over the world. The virus does survive in ancient graves and cemeteries, but if by some freak chance the disease appears again there are supplies of vaccine to protect people and stamp it out.'

Dr Edwards detached the magazine from Ryan's rifle and weighed it in his hands, showing an easy familiarity with the weapon that Ryan had never seen before. Aware of Ryan's surprise, he smiled wanly at the young man, like a headmaster still attached to a delinquent pupil.

'Left to itself, the smallpox virus is constantly mutating. We have to make sure that our supplies of vaccine are up-to-date. So WHO was careful never to completely abolish the disease. It deliberately allowed smallpox to flourish in a remote corner of a third-world country, so that it could keep an eye on how the virus was evolving. Sadly, a few people went on dying, and are still dying to this day. But it's worth it for the rest of the world. That way we'll always be ready if there's an outbreak of the disease.'

Ryan stared through the plastic windows at the wall map of Beirut and the TV monitors with their scenes of smoke and gunfire. The Hilton was burning again.

'And Beirut, doctor? Here you're keeping an eye on another virus?'

'That's right, Ryan. The virus of war. Or, if you like, the martial spirit. Not a physical virus, but a psychological one even more dangerous than smallpox. The world is at peace, Ryan. There hasn't been a war anywhere for thirty years – there are no armies or air forces, and all disputes are settled by negotiation and compromise, as they should be. No one would

dream of going to war, any more than a sane mother would shoot her own children if she was cross with them. But we have to protect ourselves against the possibility of a mad strain emerging, against the chance that another Hitler or Pol Pot might appear.'

'And you can do all that here?' Ryan scoffed. 'In Beirut?'

'We think so. We have to see what makes people fight, what makes them hate each other enough to want to kill. We need to know how we can manipulate their emotions, how we can twist the news and trigger off their aggressive drives, how we can play on their religious feelings or political ideals. We even need to know how strong the desire for peace is.'

'Strong enough. It can be strong, doctor.'

'In your case, yes. You defeated us, Ryan. That's why we've pulled you out.' Dr Edwards spoke without regret, as if he envied Ryan his dogged dream. 'It's a credit to you, but the experiment must go on, so that we can understand this terrifying virus.'

'And the bombs this morning? The surprise attack?'

'We set off the bombs, though we were careful that no one was hurt. We supply all the weapons, and always have. We print up the propaganda material, we fake the atrocity photographs, so that the rival groups betray each other and change sides. It sounds like a grim version of musical chairs, and in a way it is.'

'But all these years, doctor . . .' Ryan was thinking of his old comrades-in-arms who had died beside him in the dusty rubble. Some had given their lives to help wounded friends. 'Angel and Moshe, Aziz . . . hundreds of people dying!'

'Just as hundreds are still dying of smallpox. But thousands of millions are living – in peace. It's worth it, Ryan; we've learned so much since the UN rebuilt Beirut thirty years ago.'

'They planned it all – the Hilton, the TV station, the McDonald's . . . ?'

'Everything, even the McDonald's. The UN architects designed it as a typical world city – a Hilton, a Holiday Inn, a sports stadium, shopping malls. They brought in orphaned teenagers from all over the world, from every race and nationality. To begin with we had to prime the pump – the NCOs and officers were all UN observers fighting in disguise. But once the engine began to turn, it ran with very little help.'

'Just a few atrocity photographs . . .' Ryan stood up and began to put on his webbing. Whatever he thought of Dr Edwards, the reality of the civil war remained, the only logic that he recognised. 'Doctor, I have to go back to Beirut.'

'It's too late, Ryan. If we let you return, you'd endanger the whole experiment.'

'No one will believe me, doctor. Anyway, I must find my sister and Aunt Vera.'

'She isn't your sister, Ryan. Not your real sister. And Vera isn't your real aunt. They don't know, of course. They think you're all from the same family. Louisa was the daughter of two French explorers from Marseilles

who died in Antarctica. Vera was a foundling brought up by nuns in Montevideo.'

'And what about . . . ?'

'You, Ryan? Your parents lived in Halifax, Nova Scotia. You were three months old when they were killed in a car crash. Sadly, there are some deaths we can't yet stop . . .'

Dr Edwards was frowning at the wall map of Beirut visible through the plastic window. A signals sergeant worked frantically at the huge display, pinning on clusters of incident flags. Everyone had gathered around the monitor screens. An officer waved urgently to Dr Edwards, who stood up and left the office. Ryan stared at his hands while the two men conferred, and he scarcely heard the physician when he returned and searched for his helmet and side-arm.

'They've shot down the spotter plane. I'll have to leave you, Ryan – the fighting's getting out of control. The Royalists have overrun the Football Stadium and taken the UN post.'

'The Stadium?' Ryan was on his feet, his rifle the only security he had known since leaving the city. 'My sister and aunt are there! I'll come with you, doctor.'

'Ryan . . . everything's starting to fall apart; we may have lit one fuse too many. Some of the militia units are shooting openly at the UN observers.' Dr Edwards stopped Ryan at the door. 'I know you're concerned for them, you've lived with them all your life. But they're not –'

Ryan pushed him away. 'Doctor, they *are* my aunt and sister.'

It was three hours later when they reached the Football Stadium. As the convoy of UN vehicles edged its way into the city, Ryan gazed at the pall of smoke that covered the ruined skyline. The dark mantle extended far out to sea, lit by the flashes of high explosives as rival demolition squads moved through the streets. He sat behind Dr Edwards in the second of the armoured vans, but they could scarcely hear themselves talk above the sounds of rocket and machine-gun fire.

By this stage Ryan knew that he and Dr Edwards had little to say to each other. Ryan was thinking only of the hostages in the overrun UN post. His discovery that the civil war in Beirut was an elaborate experiment belonged to a numb area outside his mind, an emotional black hole from which no light or meaning could escape.

At last they stopped near the UN post at the harbour in East Beirut. Dr Edwards sprinted to the radio shack, and Ryan unstrapped his blue helmet. In a sense he shared the blame for this uncontrolled explosion of violence. The rats in the war laboratory had been happy pulling a familiar set of levers – the triggers of their rifles and mortars – and being fed their daily pellets of hate. Ryan's dazed dream of peace, like an untested narcotic, had disoriented them and laid them open to a frenzy of hyperactive rage . . .

'Ryan, good news!' Dr Edwards hammered on the windscreen, ordering the driver to move on. 'Christian commandos have retaken the Stadium!'

'And my sister? And Aunt Vera?'

'I don't know. Hope for the best. At least the UN is back in action. With luck, everything will return to normal.'

Later, as he stood in the sombre storeroom below the concrete grandstand, Ryan reflected on the ominous word that Dr Edwards had used. Normal . . . ? The lights of the photographers' flashes illuminated the bodies of the twenty hostages laid against the rear wall. Louisa and Aunt Vera rested between two UN observers, all executed by the Royalists before their retreat. The stepped concrete roof was splashed with blood, as if an invisible audience watching the destruction of the city from the comfort of the grandstand had begun to bleed into its seats. Yes, Ryan vowed, the world would bleed . . .

The photographers withdrew, leaving Ryan alone with Louisa and his aunt. Soon their images would be scattered across the ruined streets, pasted to the blockhouse walls.

'Ryan, we ought to leave before there's a counterattack.' Dr Edwards stepped through the pale light. 'I'm sorry about them – whatever else, they *were* your sister and aunt.'

'Yes, they were . . .'

'And at least they helped to prove something. We need to see how far human beings can be pushed.' Dr Edwards gestured helplessly at the bodies. 'Sadly, all the way.'

Ryan took off his blue helmet and placed it at his feet. He snapped back the rifle bolt and drove a steel-tipped round into the breech. He was only sorry that Dr Edwards would lie beside Louisa and his aunt. Outside there was a momentary lull in the fighting, but it would resume. Within a few months he would unite the militias into a single force. Already Ryan was thinking of the world beyond Beirut, of that far larger laboratory waiting to be tested, with its millions of docile specimens unprepared for the most virulent virus of them all.

'Not all the way, doctor.' He levelled the rifle at the physician's head. 'All the way is the whole human race.'

1989

DREAM CARGOES

Across the lagoon an eager new life was forming, drawing its spectrum of colours from a palette more vivid than the sun's. Soon after dawn, when Johnson woke in Captain Galloway's cabin behind the bridge of the *Prospero*, he watched the lurid hues, cyanic blues and crimsons, playing against the ceiling above his bunk. Reflected in the metallic surface of the lagoon, the tropical foliage seemed to concentrate the Caribbean sunlight, painting on the warm air a screen of electric tones that Johnson had only seen on the nightclub façades of Miami and Vera Cruz.

He stepped onto the tilting bridge of the stranded freighter, aware that the island's vegetation had again surged forward during the night, as if it had miraculously found a means of converting darkness into these brilliant leaves and blossoms. Shielding his eyes from the glare, he searched the 600 yards of empty beach that encircled the *Prospero*, disappointed that there was no sign of Dr Chambers' rubber infaltable. For the past three mornings, when he woke after an uneasy night, he had seen the craft beached by the inlet of the lagoon. Shaking off the overlit dreams that rose from the contaminated waters, he would gulp down a cup of cold coffee, jump from the stern rail and set off between the pools of leaking chemicals in search of the American biologist.

It pleased Johnson that she was so openly impressed by this once barren island, a left-over of nature seven miles from the north-east coast of Puerto Rico. In his modest way he knew that he was responsible for the transformation of the nondescript atoll, scarcely more than a forgotten garbage dump left behind by the American army after World War II. No one, in Johnson's short life, had ever been impressed by him, and the biologist's silent wonder gave him the first sense of achievement he had ever known.

Johnson had learned her name from the labels on the scientific stores in the inflatable. However, he had not yet approached or even spoken to her, embarrassed by his rough manners and shabby seaman's clothes, and the engrained chemical stench that banned him from sailors' bars all over the Caribbean. Now, when she failed to appear on the fourth morning, he regretted all the more that he had never worked up the courage to introduce himself.

Through the acid-streaked windows of the bridge-house he stared at the terraces of flowers that hung from the forest wall. A month earlier, when he first arrived at the island, struggling with the locked helm of the listing

freighter, there had been no more than a few stunted palms growing among the collapsed army huts and water-tanks buried in the dunes.

But already, for reasons that Johnson preferred not to consider, a wholly new vegetation had sprung to life. The palms rose like flagpoles into the vivid Caribbean air, pennants painted with a fresh green sap. Around them the sandy floor was thick with flowering vines and ground ivy, blue leaves like dappled metal foil, as if some midnight gardener had watered them with a secret plant elixir while Johnson lay asleep in his bunk.

He put on Galloway's peaked cap and examined himself in the greasy mirror. Stepping into the open deck behind the wheel-house, he inhaled the acrid chemical air of the lagoon. At least it masked the odours of the captain's cabin, a rancid bouquet of ancient sweat, cheap rum and diesel oil. He had thought seriously of abandoning Galloway's cabin and returning to his hammock in the forecastle, but despite the stench he felt that he owed it to himself to remain in the cabin. The moment that Galloway, with a last disgusted curse, had stepped into the freighter's single lifeboat he, Johnson, had become the captain of this doomed vessel.

He had watched Galloway, the four Mexican crewmen and the weary Portuguese engineer row off into the dusk, promising himself that he would sleep in the captain's cabin and take his meals at the captain's table. After five years at sea, working as cabin boy and deck hand on the lowest grade of chemical waste carrier, he had a command of his own, this antique freighter, even if the *Prospero*'s course was the vertical one to the sea-bed of the Caribbean.

Behind the funnel the Liberian flag of convenience hung in tatters, its fabric rotted by the acid air. Johnson stepped onto the stern ladder, steadying himself against the sweating hull-plates, and jumped into the shallow water. Careful to find his feet, he waded through the bilious green foam that leaked from the steel drums he had jettisoned from the freighter's deck.

When he reached the clear sand above the tide-line he wiped the emerald dye from his jeans and sneakers. Leaning to starboard in the lagoon, the *Prospero* resembled an exploded paint-box. The drums of chemical waste on the foredeck still dripped their effluent through the scuppers. The more sinister below-decks cargo – nameless organic by-products that Captain Galloway had been bribed to carry and never entered into his manifest – had dissolved the rusty plates and spilled an eerie spectrum of phosphorescent blues and indigos into the lagoon below.

Frightened of these chemicals, which every port in the Caribbean had rejected, Johnson had begun to jettison the cargo after running the freighter aground. But the elderly diesels had seized and the winch had jarred to a halt, leaving only a few of the drums on the nearby sand with their death's head warnings and eroded seams.

Johnson set off along the shore, searching the sea beyond the inlet of the lagoon for any sign of Dr Chambers. Everywhere a deranged horticulture was running riot. Vivid new shoots pushed past the metal debris of old

ammunition boxes, filing cabinets and truck tyres. Strange grasping vines clambered over the scarlet caps of giant fungi, their white stems as thick as sailors' bones. Avoiding them, Johnson walked towards an old staff car that sat in an open glade between the palms. Wheel-less, its military markings obliterated by the rain of decades, it had settled into the sand, vines encircling its roof and windshield.

Deciding to rest in the car, which once perhaps had driven an American general around the training camps of Puerto Rico, he tore away the vines that had wreathed themselves around the driver's door pillar. As he sat behind the steering wheel it occurred to Johnson that he might leave the freighter and set up camp on the island. Nearby lay the galvanised iron roof of a barrack hut, enough material to build a beach house on the safer, seaward side of the island.

But Johnson was aware of an unstated bond between himself and the derelict freighter. He remembered the last desperate voyage of the *Prospero*, which he had joined in Vera Cruz, after being duped by Captain Galloway. The short voyage to Galveston, the debarkation port, would pay him enough to ship as a deck passenger on an inter-island boat heading for the Bahamas. It had been three years since he had seen his widowed mother in Nassau, living in a plywood bungalow by the airport with her invalid boyfriend.

Needless to say, they had never berthed at Galveston, Miami or any other of the ports where they had tried to unload their cargo. The crudely sealed cylinders of chemical waste-products, supposedly en route to a reprocessing plant in southern Texas, had begun to leak before they left Vera Cruz. Captain Galloway's temper, like his erratic seamanship and consumption of rum and tequila, increased steadily as he realised that the Mexican shipping agent had abandoned them to the seas. Almost certainly the agent had pocketed the monies allocated for reprocessing and found it more profitable to let the ancient freighter, now refused entry to Vera Cruz, sail up and down the Gulf of Mexico until her corroded keel sent her conveniently to the bottom.

For two months they had cruised forlornly from one port to another, boarded by hostile maritime police and customs officers, public health officials and journalists alerted to the possibility of a major ecological disaster. At Kingston, Jamaica, a television launch trailed them to the ten-mile limit, at Santo Domingo a spotter plane of the Dominican navy was waiting for them when they tried to slip into harbour under the cover of darkness. Greenpeace power-boats intercepted them outside Tampa, Florida, when Captain Galloway tried to dump part of his cargo. Firing flares across the bridge of the freighter, the US Coast Guard dispatched them into the Gulf of Mexico in time to meet the tail of Hurricane Clara.

When at last they recovered from the storm the cargo had shifted, and the *Prospero* listed ten degrees to starboard. Fuming chemicals leaked across the decks from the fractured seams of the waste drums, boiled on the surface of the sea and sent up a cloud of acrid vapour that

left Johnson and the Mexican crewmen coughing through makeshift face-masks, and Captain Galloway barricading himself into his cabin with his tequila bottle.

First Officer Pereira had saved the day, rigging up a hose-pipe that sprayed the leaking drums with a torrent of water, but by then the *Prospero* was taking in the sea through its strained plates. When they sighted Puerto Rico the captain had not even bothered to set a course for port. Propping himself against the helm, a bottle in each hand, he signalled Pereira to cut the engines. In a self-pitying monologue, he cursed the Mexican shipping agent, the US Coast Guard, the world's agro-chemists and their despicable science that had deprived him of his command. Lastly he cursed Johnson for being so foolish ever to step aboard this ill-fated ship. As the *Prospero* lay doomed in the water, Pereira appeared with his already packed suitcase, and the captain ordered the Mexicans to lower the life-boat.

It was then that Johnson made his decision to remain on board. All his life he had failed to impose himself on anything – running errands as a six-year-old for the Nassau airport shoe-blacks, cadging pennies for his mother from the irritated tourists, enduring the years of school where he had scarcely learned to read and write, working as a dishwasher at the beach restaurants, forever conned out of his wages by the thieving managers. He had always reacted to events, never initiated anything on his own. Now, for the first time, he could become the captain of the *Prospero* and master of his own fate. Long before Galloway's curses faded into the dusk Johnson had leapt down the companionway ladder into the engine room.

As the elderly diesels rallied themselves for the last time Johnson returned to the bridge. He listened to the propeller's tired but steady beat against the dark ocean, and slowly turned the *Prospero* towards the north-west. Five hundred miles away were the Bahamas, and an endless archipelago of secret harbours. Somehow he would get rid of the leaking drums and even, perhaps, ply for hire between the islands, renaming the old tub after his mother, Velvet Mae. Meanwhile Captain Johnson stood proudly on the bridge, oversize cap on his head, 300 tons of steel deck obedient beneath his feet.

By dawn the next day he was completely lost on an open sea. During the night the freighter's list had increased. Below decks the leaking chemicals had etched their way through the hull plates, and a phosphorescent steam enveloped the bridge. The engine room was a knee-deep vat of acid brine, a poisonous vapour rising through the ventilators and coating every rail and deck-plate with a lurid slime.

Then, as Johnson searched desperately for enough timber to build a raft, he saw the old World War II garbage island seven miles from the Puerto Rican coast. The lagoon inlet was unguarded by the US Navy or Greenpeace speedboats. He steered the *Prospero* across the calm surface and let the freighter settle into the shallows. The inrush of water smothered the cargo in the hold. Able to breathe again, Johnson rolled into Captain

Galloway's bunk, made a space for himself among the empty bottles and slept his first dreamless sleep.

'Hey, you! Are you all right?' A woman's hand pounded on the roof of the staff car. 'What *are* you doing in there?'

Johnson woke with a start, lifting his head from the steering wheel. While he slept the lianas had enveloped the car, climbing up the roof and windshield pillars. Vivid green tendrils looped themselves around his left hand, tying his wrist to the rim of the wheel.

Wiping his face, he saw the American biologist peering at him through the leaves, as if he were the inmate of some bizarre zoo whose cages were the bodies of abandoned motor-cars. He tried to free himself, and pushed against the driver's door.

'Sit back! I'll cut you loose.'

She slashed at the vines with her clasp knife, revealing her fierce and determined wrist. When Johnson stepped onto the ground she held his shoulders, looking him up and down with a thorough eye. She was no more than thirty, three years older than himself, but to Johnson she seemed as self-possessed and remote as the Nassau school-teachers. Yet her mouth was more relaxed than those pursed lips of his childhood, as if she were genuinely concerned for Johnson.

'You're all right,' she informed him. 'But I wouldn't go for too many rides in that car.'

She strolled away from Johnson, her hands pressing the burnished copper trunks of the palms, feeling the urgent pulse of awakening life. Around her shoulders was slung a canvas bag holding a clipboard, sample jars, a camera and reels of film.

'My name's Christine Chambers,' she called out to Johnson. 'I'm carrying out a botanical project on this island. Have you come from the stranded ship?'

'I'm the captain,' Johnson told her without deceit. He reached into the car and retrieved his peaked cap from the eager embrace of the vines, dusted it off and placed it on his head at what he hoped was a rakish angle. 'She's not a wreck – I beached her here for repairs.'

'Really? For repairs?' Christine Chambers watched him archly, finding him at least as intriguing as the giant scarlet-capped fungi. 'So you're the captain. But where's the crew?'

'They abandoned ship.' Johnson was glad that he could speak so honestly. He liked this attractive biologist and the way she took a close interest in the island. 'There were certain problems with the cargo.'

'I bet there were. You were lucky to get here in one piece.' She took out a notebook and jotted down some observation on Johnson, glancing at his pupils and lips. 'Captain, would you like a sandwich? I've brought a picnic lunch – you look as if you could use a square meal.'

'Well . . .' Pleased by her use of his title, Johnson followed her to the beach, where the inflatable sat on the sand. Clearly she had been delayed

by the weight of stores: a bell tent, plastic coolers, cartons of canned food, and a small office cabinet. Johnson had survived on a diet of salt beef, cola and oatmeal biscuits he cooked on the galley stove.

For all the equipment, she was in no hurry to unload the stores, as if unsure of sharing the island with Johnson, or perhaps pondering a different approach to her project, one that involved the participation of the human population of the island.

Trying to reassure her, as they divided the sandwiches, he described the last voyage of the *Prospero*, and the disaster of the leaking chemicals. She nodded while he spoke, as if she already knew something of the story.

'It sounds to me like a great feat of seamanship,' she complimented him. 'The crew who abandoned ship – as it happens, they reported that she went down near Barbados. One of them, Galloway I think he was called, claimed they'd spent a month in an open boat.'

'Galloway?' Johnson assumed the pursed lips of the Nassau school-marms. 'One of my less reliable men. So no one is looking for the ship?'

'No. Absolutely no one.'

'And they think she's gone down?'

'Right to the bottom. Everyone in Barbados is relieved there's no pollution. Those tourist beaches, you know.'

'They're important. And no one in Puerto Rico thinks she's here?'

'No one except me. This island is my research project,' she explained. 'I teach biology at San Juan University, but I really want to work at Harvard. I can tell you, lectureships are hard to come by. Something very interesting is happening here, with a little luck . . .'

'It is interesting,' Johnson agreed. There was a conspiratorial note to Dr Christine's voice that made him uneasy. 'A lot of old army equipment is buried here – I'm thinking of building a house on the beach.'

'A good idea . . . even if it takes you four or five months. I'll help you out with any food you need. But be careful.' Dr Christine pointed to the weal on his arm, a temporary reaction against some invading toxin in the vine sap. 'There's something else that's interesting about this island, isn't there?'

'Well . . .' Johnson stared at the acid stains etching through the *Prospero*'s hull and spreading across the lagoon. He had tried not to think of his responsibility for these dangerous and unstable chemicals. 'There are a few other things going on here.'

'A few other things?' Dr Christine lowered her voice. 'Look, Johnson, you're sitting in the middle of an amazing biological experiment. No one would allow it to happen anywhere in the world – if they knew, the US Navy would move in this afternoon.'

'Would they take away the ship?'

'They'd take it away and sink it in the nearest ocean trench, then scorch the island with flame-throwers.'

'And what about me?'

'I wouldn't like to say. It might depend on how advanced . . .' She held his shoulder reassuringly, aware that her vehemence had shocked him. 'But

there's no reason why they should find out. Not for a while, and by then it won't matter. I'm not exaggerating when I say that you've probably created a new kind of life.'

As they unloaded the stores Johnson reflected on her words. He had guessed that the chemicals leaking from the *Prospero* had set off the accelerated growth, and that the toxic reagents might equally be affecting himself. In Galloway's cabin mirror he inspected the hairs on his chin and any suspicious moles. The weeks at sea, inhaling the acrid fumes, had left him with raw lungs and throat, and an erratic appetite, but he had felt better since coming ashore.

He watched Christine step into a pair of thigh-length rubber boots and move into the shallow water, ladle in hand, looking at the plant and animal life of the lagoon. She filled several specimen jars with the phosphorescent water, and locked them into the cabinet inside the tent.

'Johnson – you couldn't let me see the cargo manifest?'

'Captain . . . Galloway took it with him. He didn't list the real cargo.'

'I bet he didn't.' Christine pointed to the vermilion-shelled crabs that scuttled through the vivid filaments of kelp, floating like threads of blue electric cable. 'Have you noticed? There are no dead fish or crabs – and you'd expect to see hundreds. That was the first thing I spotted. And it isn't just the crabs – you look pretty healthy . . .'

'Maybe I'll be stronger?' Johnson flexed his sturdy shoulders.

'. . . in a complete daze, mentally, but I imagine that will change. Meanwhile, can you take me on board? I'd like to visit the *Prospero*.'

'Dr Christine . . .' Johnson held her arm, trying to restrain this determined woman. He looked at her clear skin and strong legs. 'It's too dangerous, you might fall through the deck.'

'Fair enough. Are the containers identified?'

'Yes, there's no secret.' Johnson did his best to remember. 'Organo . . .'

'Organo-phosphates? Right – what I need to know is which containers are leaking and roughly how much. We might be able to work out the exact chemical reactions – you may not realise it, Johnson, but you've mixed a remarkably potent cocktail. A lot of people will want to learn the recipe, for all kinds of reasons . . .'

Sitting in the colonel's chair on the porch of the beach-house, Johnson gazed contentedly at the luminous world around him, a fever-realm of light and life that seemed to have sprung from his own mind. The jungle wall of cycads, giant tamarinds and tropical creepers crowded the beach to the waterline, and the reflected colours drowned in swatches of phosphoresence that made the lagoon resemble a cauldron of electric dyes.

So dense was the vegetation that almost the only free sand lay below Johnson's feet. Every morning he would spend an hour cutting back the flowering vines and wild magnolia that inundated the metal shack. Already

the foliage was crushing the galvanised iron roof. However hard he worked – and he found himself too easily distracted – he had been unable to keep clear the inspection pathways which Christine patrolled on her weekend visits, camera and specimen jars at the ready.

Hearing the sound of her inflatable as she neared the inlet of the lagoon, Johnson surveyed his domain with pride. He had found a metal card-table buried in the sand, and laid it with a selection of fruits he had picked for Christine that morning. To Johnson's untrained eye they seemed to be strange hybrids of pomegranate and pawpaw, cantaloupe and pineapple. There were giant tomato-like berries and clusters of purple grapes each the size of a baseball. Together they glowed through the overheated light like jewels set in the face of the sun.

By now, four months after his arrival on the *Prospero*, the one-time garbage island had become a unique botanical garden, generating new species of trees, vines and flowering plants every day. A powerful life-engine was driving the island. As she crossed the lagoon in her inflatable Christine stared at the aerial terraces of vines and blossoms that had sprung up since the previous weekend.

The dead hulk of the *Prospero*, daylight visible through its acid-etched plates, sat in the shallow water, the last of its chemical wastes leaking into the lagoon. But Johnson had forgotten the ship and the voyage that had brought him here, just as he had forgotten his past life and unhappy childhood under the screaming engines of Nassau airport. Lolling back in his canvas chair, on which was stencilled 'Colonel Pottle, US Army Engineer Corps', he felt like a plantation owner who had successfully subcontracted a corner of the original Eden. As he stood up to greet Christine he thought only of the future, of his pregnant bride and the son who would soon share the island with him.

'Johnson! My God, what have you been doing?' Christine ran the inflatable onto the beach and sat back, exhausted by the buffetting waves. 'It's a botanical mad-house!'

Johnson was so pleased to see her that he forgot his regret over their weekly separations. As she explained, she had her student classes to teach, her project notes and research samples to record and catalogue.

'Dr Christine . . . ! I waited all day!' He stepped into the shallow water, a carmine surf filled with glowing animalcula, and pulled the inflatable onto the sand. He helped her from the craft, his eyes avoiding her curving abdomen under the smock.

'Go on, you can stare . . .' Christine pressed his hand to her stomach. 'How do I look, Johnson?'

'Too beautiful for me, and the island. We've all gone quiet.'

'That is gallant – you've become a poet, Johnson.'

Johnson never thought of other women, and knew that none could be so beautiful as this lady biologist bearing his child. He spotted a plastic cooler among the scientific equipment.

'Christine – you've brought me ice-cream . . .'

'Of course I have. But don't eat it yet. We've a lot to do, Johnson.'

He unloaded the stores, leaving to the last the nylon nets and spring-mounted steel frames in the bottom of the boat. These bird-traps were the one cargo he hated to unload. Nesting in the highest branches above the island was a flock of extravagant aerial creatures, sometime swallows and finches whose jewelled plumage and tail-fans transformed them into gaudy peacocks. He had set the traps reluctantly at Christine's insistence. He never objected to catching the phosphorescent fish with their enlarged fins and ruffs of external gills, which seemed to prepare them for life on the land, or the crabs and snails in their baroque armour. But the thought of Christine taking these rare and beautiful birds back to her laboratory made him uneasy – he guessed that they would soon end their days under the dissection knife.

'Did you set the traps for me, Johnson?'

'I set all of them and put in the bait.'

'Good.' Christine heaped the nets onto the sand. More and more she seemed to hurry these days, as if she feared that the experiment might end. 'I can't understand why we haven't caught one of them.'

Johnson gave an eloquent shrug. In fact he had eaten the canned sardines, and released the one bird that had strayed into the trap below the parasol of a giant cycad. The nervous creature with its silken scarlet wings and kite-like tail feathers had been a dream of flight. 'Nothing yet – they're clever, those birds.'

'Of course they are – they're a new species.' She sat in Colonel Pottle's chair, photographing the table of fruit with her small camera. 'Those grapes are huge – I wonder what sort of wine they'd make. Champagne of the gods, grand cru . . .'

Warily, Johnson eyed the purple and yellow globes. He had eaten the fish and crabs from the lagoon, when asked by Christine, with no ill effects, but he was certain that these fruits were intended for the birds. He knew that Christine was using him, like everything else on the island, as part of her experiment. Even the child she had conceived after their one brief act of love, over so quickly that he was scarcely sure it had ever occurred, was part of the experiment. Perhaps the child would be the first of a new breed of man and he, Johnson, errand runner for airport shoe-shine boys, would be the father of an advanced race that would one day repopulate the planet.

As if aware of his impressive physique, she said: 'You look wonderfully well, Johnson. If this experiment ever needs to be justified . . .'

'I'm very strong now – I'll be able to look after you and the boy.'

'It might be a girl – or something in between.' She spoke in a matter-of-fact way that always surprised him. 'Tell me, Johnson, what do you do while I'm away?'

'I think about you, Dr Christine.'

'And I certainly think about you. But do you sleep a lot?'

'No. I'm busy with my thoughts. The time goes very quickly.'

Christine casually opened her note-pad. 'You mean the hours go by without you noticing?'

'Yes. After breakfast I fill the oil-lamp and suddenly it's time for lunch. But it can go more slowly, too. If I look at a falling leaf in a certain way it seems to stand still.'

'Good. You're learning to control time. Your mind is enlarging, Johnson.'

'Maybe I'll be as clever as you, Dr Christine.'

'Ah, I think you're moving in a much more interesting direction. In fact, Johnson, I'd like you to eat some of the fruit. Don't worry, I've already analysed it, and I'll have some myself.' She was cutting slices of the melon-sized apple. 'I want the baby to try some.'

Johnson hesitated, but as Christine always reminded him, none of the new species had revealed a single deformity.

The fruit was pale and sweet, with a pulpy texture and a tang like alcoholic mango. It slightly numbed Johnson's mouth and left a pleasant coolness in the stomach.

A diet for those with wings.

'Johnson! Are you sick?'

He woke with a start, not from sleep but from an almost too-clear examination of the colour patterns of a giant butterfly that had settled on his hand. He looked up from his chair at Christine's concerned eyes, and at the dense vines and flowering creepers that crowded the porch, pressing against his shoulders. The amber of her eyes was touched by the same overlit spectrum that shone through the trees and blossoms. Everything on the island was becoming a prism of itself.

'Johnson, wake up!'

'I am awake. Christine . . . I didn't hear you come.'

'I've been here for an hour.' She touched his cheeks, searching for any sign of fever and puzzled by Johnson's distracted manner. Behind her, the inflatable was beached on the few feet of sand not smothered by the vegetation. The dense wall of palms, lianas and flowering plants had collapsed onto the shore. Engorged on the sun, the giant fruits had begun to split under their own weight, and streams of vivid juice ran across the sand, as if the forest was bleeding.

'Christine? You came back so soon . . . ?' It seemed to Johnson that she had left only a few minutes earlier. He remembered waving goodbye to her and sitting down to finish his fruit and admire the giant butterfly, its wings like the painted hands of a circus clown.

'Johnson – I've been away for a week.' She held his shoulder, frowning at the unstable wall of rotting vegetation that towered a hundred feet into the air. Cathedrals of flower-decked foliage were falling into the waters of the lagoon.

'Johnson, help me to unload the stores. You don't look as if you've eaten for days. Did you trap the birds?'

'Birds? No, nothing yet.' Vaguely Johnson remembered setting the traps, but he had been too distracted by the wonder of everything to pursue the birds. Graceful, feather-tipped wraiths like gaudy angels, their crimson plumage leaked its ravishing hues onto the air. When he fixed his eyes onto them they seemed suspended against the sky, wings fanning slowly as if shaking the time from themselves.

He stared at Christine, aware that the colours were separating themselves from her skin and hair. Superimposed images of herself, each divided from the others by a fraction of a second, blurred the air around her, an exotic plumage that sprang from her arms and shoulders. The staid reality that had trapped them all was beginning to dissolve. Time had stopped and Christine was ready to rise into the air . . .

He would teach Christine and the child to fly.

'Christine, we can all learn.'

'What, Johnson?'

'We can learn to fly. There's no time any more – everything's too beautiful for time.'

'Johnson, look at my watch.'

'We'll go and live in the trees, Christine. We'll live with the high flowers . . .'

He took her arm, eager to show her the mystery and beauty of the sky people they would become. She tried to protest, but gave in, humouring Johnson as he led her gently from the beach-house to the wall of inflamed flowers. Her hand on the radio-transmitter in the inflatable, she sat beside the crimson lagoon as Johnson tried to climb the flowers towards the sun. Steadying the child within her, she wept for Johnson, only calming herself two hours later when the siren of a naval cutter crossed the inlet.

'I'm glad you radioed in,' the US Navy lieutenant told Christine. 'One of the birds reached the base at San Juan. We tried to keep it alive but it was crushed by the weight of its own wings. Like everything else on this island.'

He pointed from the bridge to the jungle wall. Almost all the over-crowded canopy had collapsed into the lagoon, leaving behind only a few of the original palms with their bird traps. The blossoms glowed through the water like thousands of drowned lanterns.

'How long has the freighter been here?' An older civilian, a government scientist holding a pair of binoculars, peered at the riddled hull of the *Prospero*. Below the beach-house two sailors were loading the last of Christine's stores into the inflatable. 'It looks as if it's been stranded there for years.'

'Six months,' Christine told him. She sat beside Johnson, smiling at him encouragingly. 'When Captain Johnson realised what was going on he asked me to call you.'

'Only six? That must be roughly the life-cycle of these new species. Their cellular clocks seem to have stopped – instead of reproducing,

they force-feed their own tissues, like those giant fruit that contain no seeds. The life of the individual becomes the entire life of the species.' He gestured towards the impassive Johnson. 'That probably explains our friend's altered time sense – great blocks of memory were coalescing in his mind, so that a ball thrown into the air would never appear to land . . .'

A tide of dead fish floated past the cutter's bow, the gleaming bodies like discarded costume jewellery.

'You weren't contaminated in any way?' the lieutenant asked Christine. 'I'm thinking of the baby.'

'No, I didn't eat any of the fruit,' Christine said firmly. 'I've been here only twice, for a few hours.'

'Good. Of course, the medical people will do all the tests.'

'And the island?'

'We've been ordered to torch the whole place. The demolition charges are timed to go off in just under two hours, but we'll be well out of range. It's a pity, in a way.'

'The birds are still here,' Christine said, aware of Johnson staring at the trees.

'Luckily, you've trapped them all.' The scientist offered her the binoculars. 'Those organic wastes are hazardous things – God knows what might happen if human beings were exposed to long-term contact. All sorts of sinister alterations to the nervous system – people might be happy to stare at a stone all day.'

Johnson listened to them talking, glad to feel Christine's hand in his own. She was watching him with a quiet smile, aware that they shared the conspiracy. She would try to save the child, the last fragment of the experiment, and he knew that if it survived it would face a fierce challenge from those who feared it might replace them.

But the birds endured. His head had cleared, and he remembered the visions that had given him a brief glimpse of another, more advanced world. High above the collapsed canopy of the forest he could see the traps he had set, and the great crimson birds sitting on their wings. At least they could carry the dream forward.

Ten minutes later, when the inflatable had been winched onto the deck, the cutter set off through the inlet. As it passed the western headland the lieutenant helped Christine towards the cabin. Johnson followed them, then pushed aside the government scientist and leapt from the rail, diving cleanly into the water. He struck out for the shore a hundred feet away, knowing that he was strong enough to climb the trees and release the birds, with luck a mating pair who would take him with them in their escape from time.

1990

A GUIDE TO VIRTUAL DEATH

For reasons amply documented elsewhere, intelligent life on earth became extinct in the closing hours of the 20th Century. Among the clues left to us, the following schedule of a day's television programmes transmitted to an unnamed city in the northern hemisphere on December 23, 1999, offers its own intriguing insight into the origins of the disaster.

6.00 am Porno-Disco. Wake yourself up with his-and-her hard-core sex images played to a disco beat.

7.00 Weather Report. Today's expected micro-climates in the city's hotel atriums, shopping malls and office complexes. Hilton International promises an afternoon snow-shower as a Christmas appetiser.

7.15 News Round-up. What our news-makers have planned for you. Maybe a small war, a synthetic earthquake or a famine-zone/charity tie-in.

7.45 Breakfast Time. Gourmet meals to watch as you eat your diet cellulose.

8.30 Commuter Special. The rush-hour game-show. How many bottoms can you pinch, how many faces can you slap?

9.30 The Travel Show. Visit the world's greatest airports and underground car parks.

10.30 Home-makers of Yesterday. Nostalgic scenes of old-fashioned housework. No.7 – The Vacuum Cleaner.

11.00 Office War. Long-running serial of office gang-wars.

12.00 Newsflash. The networks promise either a new serial killer or a deadly food toxin.

1.00 pm Live from Parliament. No.12 – The Alcoholic MP.

1.30 The Nose-Pickers. Hygiene programme for the kiddies.

2.00 Caress Me. Soft-porn for the siesta hour.

2.30 Your Favourite Commericials. Popular demand re-runs of golden-oldie TV ads.

3.00 Housewives' Choice. Rape, and how to psychologically prepare yourself.

4.00 Count-down. Game show in which contestants count backwards from one million.

5.00 Newsflash. Either an airliner crash or a bank collapse. Viewers express preference.

6.00 *Today's Special.* Virtual Reality TV presents 'The Kennedy Assassination.' The Virtual Reality head-set takes you to Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963. First you fire the assassin's rifle from the Book Depository window, and then you sit between Jackie and JFK in the Presidential limo as the bullet strikes. For premium subscribers only – feel the Presidential brain tissue spatter your face OR wipe Jackie's tears onto your handkerchief.

8.00 Dinner Time. More gourmet dishes to view with your evening diet-cellulose.

9.00 Science Now. Is there life after death? Micro-electrodes pick up ultra-faint impulses from long-dead brains. Relatives question the departed.

10.00 Crime-Watch. Will it be your home that is broken into tonight by the TV Crime Gang?

11.00 *Today's Special.* Tele-Orgasm. Virtual Reality TV takes you to an orgy. Have sex with the world's greatest movie-stars. Tonight: Marilyn Monroe and Madonna OR Warren Beatty and Tom Cruise. For premium subscribers only – experience transexualism, paedophilia, terminal syphilis, gang-rape, and bestiality (choice: German Shepherd or Golden Retriever).

1.00 am Newsflash. Tonight's surprise air-crash.

2.00 The Religious Hour. Imagine being dead. Priests and neuro-scientists construct a life-like mock-up of your death.

3.00 Night-Hunter. Will the TV Rapist come through your bedroom window?

4.15 Sex for Insomniacs. Soft porn to rock you to sleep.

5.00 The Charity Hour. Game show in which Third-World contestants beg for money.

1992

THE MESSAGE FROM MARS

The successful conclusion of NASA's Mars mission in 2008, signalled by the safe touch-down of the Zeus IV space vehicle at Edwards Air Force Base in California, marked an immense triumph for the agency. During the 1990s, after the failure of the Shuttle project, NASA's entire future was in jeopardy. The American public's lack of interest in the space programme, coupled with unsettling political events in the former Soviet bloc, led Congress to cut back its funding of astronautics. Successive US Presidents were distracted by the task of balancing the national budget, and their scientific advisers had long insisted that the exploration of the solar system could be achieved far more economically by unmanned vehicles.

But NASA's directors had always known that the scientific exploration of space was a small part of the agency's claim to existence. Manned flights alone could touch the public imagination and guarantee the huge funds needed to achieve them. The triumph of the Apollo landing on the moon in 1969 had shown that the road to the spiritual heart of America could be paved with dollar bills, but by the year 2000 that road seemed permanently closed. Struggling to keep the agency alive, the NASA chiefs found themselves reduced to the satellite mapping of mid-western drought areas, and were faced with the prospect of being absorbed into the Department of Agriculture.

However, at the last hour the agency was saved, and given the funds to embark on its greatest mission. The announcement in Peking on January 1, 2001, that a Chinese spacecraft had landed on the moon sent an uneasy tremor through the American nation. True, the Stars and Stripes had been planted on the moon more than thirty years earlier, but that event lay in a past millennium. Was the next millennium to be dominated by the peoples on the Asian side of the Pacific rim, spending their huge trade surpluses on spectacular projects that would seize the planet's imagination for the next century?

As the pictures of the Chinese astronauts, posing beside their pagoda-shaped space vehicle, The Temple of Lightness, were relayed to the world's TV screens, news came that an Indonesian space crew and an unmanned Korean probe would soon land next to the Chinese.

Galvanised by all this, a no longer somnolent President Quayle addressed both houses of Congress. Within weeks NASA was assigned a multi-billion-dollar emergency fund and ordered to launch a crash

programme that would leap-frog the moon and land an American on Mars before the end of the decade.

NASA, as always, rose bravely to the challenge of the tax-dollar. Armies of elderly space-engineers were recruited from their Florida retirement homes. Fifty civilian and military test pilots were pressed into astronaut training. Within two years Zeus I, the unmanned prototype of the vast space vehicles that would later carry a five-man crew, had roared away from Cape Canaveral on a six-month reconnaissance voyage. It circled the Red Planet a dozen times and surveyed the likely landing zone, before returning successfully to Earth.

After two more unmanned flights, in 2005 and 2006, Zeus IV set off in November, 2007, guaranteeing President Quayle's third-term electoral landslide, which the five astronauts saluted from the flight-deck of the spacecraft. By now the Chinese, Indonesian and Korean lunar programmes had been forgotten. The world's eyes were fixed on the Zeus IV, and its five crew-members were soon more famous than any Hollywood superstar.

Wisely, NASA had selected an international crew, led by Colonel Dean Irwin of the USAF. Captain Clifford Horner and Commander John Merritt were former US Army and Navy test pilots, but the team was completed by a Russian doctor, Colonel Valentina Tsarev, and a Japanese computer specialist, Professor Hiroshi Kawahito.

During the two-month voyage to Mars the quirks and personalities of the five astronauts became as familiar as any face across a breakfast table. The Zeus IV was the largest spacecraft ever launched, and had the dimensions of a nuclear submarine. Its wide control rooms and observation decks, its crew facilities and non-denominational chapel (if a marriage was arranged, Colonel Irwin was authorized to conduct it) happily reminded TV viewers of the Starship Enterprise in the *Star Trek* TV series, still endlessly broadcast on a hundred networks. Everyone responded to the calm and dignified presence of Colonel Irwin, the deadpan humour of Captain Horner, the chirpy computer-speak of the mercurial Japanese, and the mothering but sometimes flirtatious eye of Dr Valentina. Millions of viewers rallied to their aid when the Zeus IV passed through an unexpected meteor storm, but the ultra-hard carbon fibre and ceramic hull, a byproduct of the most advanced tank armour, proved even more resilient than the designers had hoped. The inspection space-walks seemed like gracefully choreographed ballets – which of course they were, like every other activity shown to the TV audience – and confirmed that mankind had at last entered the second Space Age.

Two months to the day after leaving Cape Canaveral, the Zeus IV landed on Mars, whose sombre presence had loomed ever more threateningly for the previous weeks. Signals blackouts caused by the planet's magnetic field added their own thrills and panics, skilfully orchestrated by NASA's PR specialists. But the landing was a triumph, celebrated by the hoisting of the Stars and Stripes and, behind it, the flag of the United Nations.

Within an hour the crew of the Zeus IV was standing on Martian soil beside the spacecraft, intoning their carefully rehearsed 'Hymn to the Space Age'. From that moment no Congressman dared to deny the NASA chiefs anything they demanded.

For the next six weeks public interest in the Mars mission remained high, sustained by NASA's careful attention to the emotional needs of the worldwide audience. Life within the spacecraft was presented as a cross between a TV sitcom and a classroom course in elementary astronautics. The crew tolerantly went along with these charades. Dr Valentina was seen replacing a filling in Commander Merritt's mouth, and Professor Kawahito, the heart-throb of a billion Asian viewers, won a hard-fought chess tournament against the Zeus IV's combined on-board computers. Romance was in the air as Dr Valentina's cabin door remained tantalizingly ajar. The TV cameras followed the crew as they drove in their excursion vehicles across the fossil Martian seas, collecting rock samples and analysing the local atmosphere.

At the halfway stage of their mission the crew revealed a mild impatience with the media roles imposed on them, which the NASA psychologists attributed to a greater maturity brought on by a sense of planetary awe. To remind them of Earth, the astronauts were urged to watch episodes of *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and *The Flintstones*, and to take part in a series of Oval Office interviews with President Quayle. But their spirits lifted as the day of departure drew near. When the Zeus IV rose at last from the Martian surface the entire crew burst spontaneously into an unscripted cheer, in which some observers detected a small note of irony.

Ignoring this impromptu levity, NASA planned a lavish reception at Edwards Air Force Base, where the Zeus IV would land. Every Congressman and Governor in the United States would be present, along with President Quayle, the heads of state of thirty countries and a host of entertainment celebrities. An unending programme of media appearances awaited the astronauts – there would be triumphal parades through a dozen major cities, followed by a worldwide tour lasting a full six months. NASA had already appointed firms of literary agents and public relations experts to look after the commercial interests of the astronauts. There were sports sponsorships, book contracts and highly paid consultancies. The news of these deals was transmitted to the home-coming crew, who seemed gratified by the interest in their achievement, unaware that whenever they appeared on screen their images were accompanied by the cash totals now committed to them. Two days before the Zeus IV landed, NASA announced that three major Hollywood studios would collaborate on the most expensive film of all time, in which the astronauts would play themselves in a faithful recreation of the Martian voyage.

So, at 3.35 pm on April 29, 2008, the Zeus IV appeared in the California sky. Accompanied by six chase planes, the spacecraft swept down to a perfect landing, guided by its on-board computers to within 50 metres

of President Quayle's reception podium. The stunned silence was broken by an immense cheer when two of the astronauts were glimpsed in the observation windows. The crowd surged forward, waiting for the hatches to open as soon as the landing checks were over.

Despite the warmth of this welcome, the astronauts were surprisingly reluctant to emerge from their craft. The decontamination teams were poised by the airlocks, ready to board the spaceship and evacuate its atmosphere for laboratory analysis. But the crew had overridden the computerized sequences and made no reply over the radio link to the urgent queries of the ground controllers. They had switched off the television cameras inside the craft, but could be seen through the observation windows, apparently tidying their cabins and changing into overalls. Dr Valentina was spotted in the galley, apparently sterilizing her surgical instruments. A rumour swept the review stands, where President Quayle, the Congress and invited heads of state sweltered in the sun, that one of the crew had been injured on re-entry, but it soon transpired that Dr Valentina was merely making soup. Even more strangely, Professor Kawahito was seen setting out six parallel chessboards, as if preparing for another tournament.

At this point, an hour after their arrival, the crew became irritated by the grimacing faces pressed against the observation windows, and the interior shutters abruptly closed. This dismissive gesture made the crowd even more restive, and the ground staff tried to force the main hatch. When they failed, the head of NASA's crash recovery team began to pound on the locks with a baseball bat borrowed from a youngster seated on his father's shoulders. The first whistles and jeers rose from the crowd, who jostled the scaffolding towers on which the impatient TV crews were waiting. A cameraman lost his footing and fell through the roof of a parked bus. Loud-speakers blared meaninglessly across the million or more spectators sitting on their cars around the perimeter of the airfield. The heads of state, diplomats and generals consulted their watches, while President Quayle, making involuntary putting movements with the portable microphone in his hands, beckoned in an unsettling way to his military aide carrying the briefcase of nuclear launch codes. The boos of the crowd were only drowned when a squadron of jet planes flew low over the field, releasing streams of red, white and blue smoke. Ordered away by the frantic control tower, the victory flight broke up in confusion as the pilots returned to their muster points in the sky, leaving a delirium of crazed smoke over the Zeus IV.

At last calm was restored when a company of military police took up positions around the spacecraft, forcing the crowds behind the VIP stands. Led by President Quayle, the dignitaries shuffled from their seats and hurried along the lines of red carpet to the refreshment tents. The TV cameras trained their lenses on the Zeus IV, watching for the smallest sign of movement.

* * *

As evening fell, the spectators beyond the airfield perimeter began to disperse. Powerful arc-lights bathed the spacecraft, and during the night a fresh attempt was made to contact the crew. But the messages in morse code tapped on the hull, like the laser beams shone at the darkened observation windows, failed to draw any response. No sound could be heard from the interior of the craft, as if the crew had settled in for the night, and a hundred theories began to circulate among the NASA chiefs and the teams of doctors and psychiatrists summoned to their aid.

Were the astronauts in the last stages of a fatal contagious disease? Had their brains been invaded by an alien parasite? Were they too emotionally exhausted by their voyage to face the reception awaiting them, or gripped by so strong a sense of humility that they longed only for silence and anonymity? Had an unexpected consequence of time dilation returned them psychologically hours or days after their physical arrival? Had they, perhaps, died in a spiritual sense, or were they, for inexplicable reasons of their own, staging a mutiny?

Surrounded by the deserted stands and the silent bunting, the NASA chiefs made their decision. An hour before dawn two thermal lances played their fiery hoses against the heat-resistant plates of the spacecraft. But the carbon-ceramic hull of the Zeus IV had been forged in temperatures far beyond those of a thermal lance.

A controlled explosion was the only solution, despite the danger to the crew within. But as the demolition squad placed their charges against the ventral hatchway, the shutter of an observation window opened for the first time. Captured on film, the faces of Colonel Irwin and Commander Merritt looked down at the limpet mines, the detonators and fuse wire. They gazed calmly at the NASA officials and engineers gesticulating at them, and shook their heads, rejecting the world with a brief wave before closing the shutter for the last time.

Needless to say, NASA allowed nothing of this to leak to the public at large, and claimed that the crew had alerted their ground controllers to the possible dangers of a virulent interplanetary disease. NASA spokesmen confirmed that they had ordered the crew to isolate themselves until this mystery virus could be identified and destroyed. The Zeus IV was hitched to its tractor and moved to an empty hangar on a remote corner of the airbase, safe from the TV cameras and the thousands still camped around the perimeter fence.

Here, over the next weeks and months, teams of engineers and psychologists, astrophysicists and churchmen tried to free the crew from their self-imposed prison. Right from the start, as the doors of the hangar sealed the Zeus IV from the world, it was taken for granted that the astronauts' immolation was entirely voluntary. Nonetheless, an armed guard, backed by electronic security devices, kept careful watch on the craft. Sets of aircraft scales were manoeuvred under the landing wheels, so that the weight of the Zeus IV could be measured at all times, and instantly expose any attempt at escape.

As it happened, the spaceship's weight remained constant, never fluctuating by more than the accumulated dust on its hull. In all senses the Zeus IV constituted a sealed world, immune to any pressures from within or without. A controlled explosion strong enough to split the hull would also rupture the engines and disperse the craft's nuclear fuel supply, provoking a worldwide political outcry that would doom NASA forever. There was no way of starving the crew out – to deal with the possibility of the Zeus IV missing its rendezvous with Mars and stranding itself forever in deep space, a 200-ton stock of food had been placed aboard, enough to last the crew for 40 years. Its air, water and human wastes were recycled, and there were enough episodes of *Dallas* in the video-library to amuse the astronauts for all eternity.

The Zeus, in fact, no longer needed the Earth, and the NASA officials accepted that only psychological means would ever persuade the crew to leave their craft. They assumed that a profound spiritual crisis had afflicted the astronauts, and that until this resolved itself the rescuers' main task was to establish a channel of communication.

So began a long series of ruses, pleas and stratagems. The puzzled entreaties of relatives, whose tearful faces were projected onto the hangar roof, the prayers of churchmen, the offer of huge cash bribes, the calls to patriotism and even the threat of imprisonment, failed to prompt a single response. After two months, when public curiosity was still at fever pitch, the NASA teams admitted to themselves that the Zeus IV crew had probably not even heard these threats and promises.

Meanwhile an impatient President Quayle, aware that he was the butt of cartoonists and TV comedians, demanded firmer action. He ordered that pop music be played at full blast against the spacecraft's hull and, further, that the huge ship be rocked violently from side to side until the crew came to their senses. This regime was tried but discontinued after two hours, partly for its sheer ludicrousness, and partly for fear of damaging the nuclear reactors.

More thoughtful opinion was aware that the crisis afflicting the Zeus crew merited careful study in its own right, if mankind were ever to live permanently in space. A prominent theologian was invited to the Edwards airbase, and surveyed the claustrophobic hangar in which the Zeus was now entombed, draped like Gulliver in its cables and acoustic sensors. He wondered why the crew had bothered to return to Earth at all, knowing what they probably faced, when they might have stayed forever on the vast and empty landscapes of Mars. By returning at all, he ventured, they were making an important point, and acknowledged that they still saw their place among the human race.

So a patient vigil began. Concealed cameras watched for any signs of internal movement and electronic gauges mapped the smallest activities of the crew. After a further three months the daily pattern of life within the Zeus IV had been well established. The crew never spoke to each other,

except when carrying out the daily maintenance checks of the spacecraft systems. All took regular exercise in the gymnasium, but otherwise stayed in their own quarters. No music was played and they never listened to radio or television. For all that anyone knew, they passed the days in sleep, meditation and prayer. The temperature remained at a steady 68°F., and the only constant sound was that of the circulation of air.

After six months the NASA psychiatrists concluded that the crew of the Zeus IV had suffered a traumatic mental collapse, probably brought on by oxygen starvation, and were now in a vegetative state. Relatives protested, but public interest began to wane. Congress refused to allocate funds for further Zeus missions, and NASA reluctantly committed itself to a future of instrumented spaceflights.

A year passed, and a second. A small guard and communications crew, including a duty psychologist and a clergyman, still maintained a vigil over the Zeus. The monitors recorded the faint movements of the crew, and the patterns of daily life which they had established within a few hours of their landing. A computerized analysis of their foot-treads identified each of the astronauts and revealed that they kept to their own quarters and seldom met, though all took part in the maintenance drills.

So the astronauts languished in their twilight world. A new President and the unfolding decades of peace led the public to forget about the Zeus IV, and its crew, if remembered at all, were assumed to be convalescing at a secret institution. In 2016, eight years after their return, there was a flurry of activity when a deranged security officer lit a large fire under the spacecraft, in an attempt to smoke out the crew. Four years later a Hollywood telepathist claimed to be in contact with the astronauts, reporting that they had met God on Mars and had been sworn to silence about the tragic future in store for the human race.

In 2025 the NASA headquarters in Houston were alerted to a small but sudden fall in the overall weight of the Zeus – 170 pounds had been wiped from the scales. Was the spacecraft preparing for take-off, perhaps employing an anti-gravity device which the crew had been constructing in the seventeen years since their return? However, the tread-pattern analysis confirmed that only four astronauts were now aboard the craft. Colonel Irwin was missing, and an exhaustive hunt began of the Edwards airbase. But the organic sediments in the trapped gases released from a discharge vent revealed what some engineers had already suspected. Colonel Irwin had died at the age of 62, and his remains had been vapourized and returned to the atmosphere. Four years later he was followed by the Japanese, Professor Kawahito, and the Zeus was lighter by a further 132 pounds. The food stocks aboard the Zeus would now last well beyond the deaths of the three astronauts still alive.

In 2035 NASA was dissolved, and its functions assigned to the immensely wealthy universities which ran their own scientific space programmes. The Zeus IV was offered to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, but the

director declined, on the grounds that the museum could not accept exhibits that contained living organisms. The USAF had long wished to close the Edwards airbase, and responsibility for this huge desert expanse passed to the National Parks Bureau, which was eager to oversee one of the few areas of California not yet covered with tract housing. The armed guards around the Zeus IV had long gone, and two field officers supervised the elderly instruments that still kept watch over the spacecraft.

Captain Horner died in 2040, but the event was not noticed until the following year when a bored repairman catalogued the accumulated acoustic tapes and ran a computer analysis of tread-patterns and overall weight.

The news of this death, mentioned only in the National Parks Bureau's annual report, came to the attention of a Las Vegas entrepreneur who had opened the former Nevada atomic proving grounds to the tourist trade, mounting simulated A-bomb explosions. He leased the Zeus hangar from the Parks Bureau, and small parties of tourists trooped around the spacecraft, watching bemused as the rare tread-patterns crossed the sonar screens in the monitor room.

After three years of poor attendances the tours were discontinued, but a decade later a Tijuana circus proprietor sub-leased the site for his winter season. He demolished the now derelict hangar and constructed an inflatable astro-dome with a huge arena floor. Helium-filled latex 'spacecraft' circled the Zeus IV, and the performance ended with a mass ascent of the huge vehicle by a team of topless women acrobats.

When the dome was removed the Zeus IV sat under the stars, attached to a small shack where a single technician of the Parks Bureau kept a desultory watch on the computer screens for an hour each day. The spaceship was now covered with graffiti and obscene slogans, and the initials of thousands of long-vanished tourists. With its undercarriage embedded in the desert sand, it resembled a steam locomotive of the 19th century, which many passers-by assumed it to be.

Tramps and hippies sheltered under its fins, and at one time the craft was incorporated into a small shanty village. In later years a desert preacher attracted a modest following, claiming that the Messiah had made his second coming and was trapped inside the Zeus. Another cultist claimed that the devil had taken up residence in the ancient structure. The tract housing drew ever closer, and eventually surrounded the Zeus, which briefly served as an illuminated landmark advertising an unsuccessful fast-food franchise.

In 2070, sixty-two years after its return from Mars, a young graduate student at Reno University erected a steel frame around the Zeus and attached a set of high-intensity magnetic probes to its hull. The computerized imaging equipment – later confiscated by the US Government – revealed the silent and eerie interior of the spacecraft, its empty flight decks and corridors.

An aged couple, Commander John Merritt and Dr Valentina Tsarev,

now in their late eighties, sat in their small cabins, hands folded on their laps. There were no books or ornaments beside their simple beds. Despite their extreme age they were clearly alert, tidy and reasonably well nourished. Most mysteriously, across their eyes moved the continuous play of a keen and amused intelligence.

1992

REPORT FROM AN OBSCURE PLANET

After an immense journey we have at last landed on this remote planet, ready to carry out our rescue mission. The emergency signals transmitted to us were frantic in their intensity, but everything seems to be in order here. Our first surveys confirm that no natural catastrophe is imminent. The climatic cover and atmospheric circulation are stable, despite a recent rise in the levels of background radiation. There is evidence of the long-term erosion of the ecological base, but this is still more than adequate to support life.

Aerial reconnaissance of the hundreds of cities that occupy the major continents suggests that the population of the planet numbers many billions, though none of the inhabitants has emerged to greet us. Presumably they are still seeking refuge from the disaster that threatened to overwhelm them. We have entered many of the cities and have found them deserted, but there is no sign of the vast underground shelters needed to harbour this huge population. The possibility remains that the inhabitants fled from their planet in despair, fearing that their call for help had not been heard. Yet the restricted capacities of their aerospace technology rule out this escape route, and we assume that they are still in hiding.

In an attempt to reassure them, we are making use of the local television and radio facilities, and have broadcast a signal of greeting and friendship. Surprisingly, this has activated the planet's extensive computer networks, which have reacted with a sudden show of alarm, as if well used to mistrusting these declarations of good intent.

We have found that the computer system is fully operational. Large sections of the system, in particular its predictive and cognitive functions, have been self-generated within the recent past, when the computer networks seem to have independently mobilised themselves to face the imminent disaster.

Our investigations confirm that this threat was closely tied to an important date in the planetary calendar, represented by the notation '24.00 hours, December 31, 1999'. Evidently this marked the end of two epochs of great significance, and the beginning of both a new century and a new millennium. It now appears certain that our own arrival coincided almost exactly with, though may fractionally have overrun, this auspicious moment, which was perceived by the computer networks as a final and desperate deadline.

The planet's entire computer system is still at an ultra-high state of

arousal, registering a recent all-out response to extreme peril. Only a small volume of signal traffic moves between the satellite links, but there are gigantic memory stores with a capacity far in excess of the system's needs. These memory banks are now full, guarded by complex codes that we have been unable to break, and are perhaps the treasure house and terminal repository of the planet's ancestral knowledge.

So impressive are the defences of the system that we are now convinced that it was these computers that authorised the transmission of the emergency signal summoning us to their world's rescue.

However, there is still no sign of the inhabitants, and no response to our broadcast greetings. The cities and their suburbs, the airports and highways remain silent. Meanwhile we are carrying out a survey of these people, and of their values and civic virtues, and have come across a number of striking paradoxes. It is clear that their technological and scientific skills are of an advanced order, allowing them to construct the vast cities that dominate the planet's surface. An immense infrastructure of roads, bridges and tunnels has been laid down in the recent past, augmented by an aviation system that reaches the remotest outposts of their world.

The planet's mineral, energy and agricultural resources have been efficiently, and even ruthlessly, exploited. A simple but evidently attractive system of barter, based on the concept of money, facilitates the transfer of manufactured goods and services, and the surplus wealth generated has funded an ever-expanding science and technology. Space-flight, except in its most primitive forms, still lies beyond the abilities of these people, but they have harnessed the energy of the atom, deciphered the molecular codes that oversee their own reproduction, and seem well on the way to banishing disease and solving the mysteries of life and immortality.

At the same time, our researches have shown that despite these achievements the peoples of this planet have in other respects scarcely raised themselves above the lowest levels of barbarism. The enjoyment of pain and violence is as natural to them as the air they breathe. War above all is their most popular sport, in which rival populations, and frequently entire continents, attack each other with the most vicious and destructive weapons, regardless of the death and suffering that follow. These conflicts may last for years or decades. Nations nominally at peace devote a large proportion of their collective income to constructing arsenals of lethal weapons, and satisfy the appetites of their populations with a display of brutal entertainments in which violence, humiliation and murder are almost the sole ingredients.

Not surprisingly, our latest research confirms that the imminent threat to which their computers alerted us was in fact represented by the existence of these people. They constituted the danger that was about to overwhelm their planet, and it was to save themselves that the computer networks summoned us from the far side of the universe.

The deadline set by the computers, the crucial hour when one millennium gave way to another, perhaps explains the reason for their alarm. Given these people's hunger for violence, it may be that they saw the birth of a new millennium as a licence for an even greater carnival of destruction. They waited at the threshold of space, a barbaric horde with the secret of immortality within their grasp, eager to play with their own psychopathology as the ultimate game.

The prospect of this virulent plague spreading across the universe must have prompted the planet's computers to call a halt. But the ultimate mystery remains of where the inhabitants have disappeared. If they have been physically annihilated in an act of planetary hygiene there is no trace of the billions of corpses or of the vast necropolis needed to inter them.

A possible explanation occurs to us as we prepare to return to our home star. Driven by the need for a more lifelike replica of the scenes of carnage that most entertained them, the people of this unhappy world had invented an advanced and apparently interiorised version of their television screens, a virtual replica of reality in which they could act out their most deviant fantasies. These three-dimensional simulations were generated by their computers, and had reached a stage of development in the last years of the millennium in which the imitation of reality was more convincing than the original. It may even have become the new reality to the extent that their cities and highways, their fellow citizens and, ultimately, themselves seemed mere illusions by comparison with the electronically generated amusement park where they preferred to play. Here they could assume any identity, create and fulfil any desire, and explore the most deviant dreams.

But at some point in the new millennium they might well have decided to return to the world and test it against those dreams, ready to destroy it like a child bored with an unresponsive toy. Is it possible that the computers of this planet, having welcomed the population into this cave of illusion, then made a desperate decision and entombed them magnetically, translating them by some as yet undiscovered science into a memorised version of their physical selves? Once inside the cave, the door of virtual death was sealed and encrypted behind them, leaving the computers alone and safe at last.

If so, we arrived some moments too late. As we leave, the computers have calmed themselves, and are singing quietly in unison. Perhaps they miss their former companions, however brutish. Our concluding survey indicates that they have invented God, perhaps an idealised image of the race they entombed. As we set out into space we can hear them praying.

1992

New Stories for the American Edition

THE SECRET AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF J.G.B.

On waking one morning, B was surprised to see that Shepperton was deserted. He entered the kitchen at 9 o'clock, annoyed to find that neither his post nor the daily newspapers had been delivered, and that a power failure prevented him from preparing his breakfast. He spent an hour staring at the melting ice that dripped from his refrigerator, and then went next door to complain to his neighbour.

Surprisingly, his neighbour's house was empty. His car stood in the drive, but the entire family – husband, wife, children and dog – had disappeared. Even more odd, the street was filled by an unbroken silence. No traffic moved along the nearby motorway, and not a single aircraft flew overhead towards London Airport. B crossed the road and knocked on several doors. Through the windows he could see the empty interiors. Nothing in this peaceful suburb was out of place, except for its missing tenants.

Thinking that perhaps some terrible calamity was imminent – a nuclear catastrophe, or a sudden epidemic after a research laboratory accident – and that by some unfortunate mishap he alone had not been warned, B returned home and switched on his transistor radio. The apparatus worked, but all the stations were silent, the continental transmitters as well as those of the United Kingdom. Disconcerted, B returned to the street and gazed at the empty sky. It was a calm, sun-filled day, crossed by peaceful clouds that gave no hint of any natural disaster.

B took his car and drove to the centre of Shepperton. The town was deserted, and none of the shops was open. A train stood in the station, empty and without any of the passengers who regularly travelled to London. Leaving Shepperton, B crossed the Thames to the nearby town of Walton. There again he found the streets completely silent. He stopped in front of the house owned by his friend P, whose car was parked in her drive. Using the spare key that he carried, he unlocked the front door and entered the house. But even as he called her name he could see that there was no trace of the young woman. She had not slept in her bed. In the kitchen the melting ice of the refrigerator had formed a large pool on the floor. There was no electric power, and the telephone was dead.

Resuming his journey, B systematically explored the neighbouring towns, circling them all as he approached central London. He was no longer surprised to find the huge metropolis totally deserted. He drove down an empty Piccadilly, crossed Trafalgar Square in silence and parked outside the unguarded Buckingham Palace. As dusk fell he decided to return to Shepperton. He had

almost run out of fuel and was forced to break into a filling station. However, no policemen were out on patrol or in their stations. He left behind him an immense city plunged into darkness, where the only lights were the reflections of his headlamps.

B passed a disturbed night, with the radio mute beside his bed. But when he woke to another luminous morning his confidence returned. After an initial doubt, he was relieved to see that Shepperton was still deserted. The food within his refrigerator had begun to rot; he needed fresh provisions and a means of cooking for himself. He drove into Shepperton, broke a window of the supermarket and collected several cartons of canned meat and vegetables, rice and sugar. In the hardware store he found a paraffin stove, and look it home with a tin of fuel. Water no longer flowed in the mains, but he estimated that the contents of the roof cistern would last him a week or more. Further forays to the local stores furnished him with a supply of candles, torches and batteries.

In the following week B made several expeditions to London. He returned to the houses and flats of his friends, but found them empty. He broke into Scotland Yard and the newspaper offices in Fleet Street, in the hope of finding some explanation for the disappearance of an entire population. Lastly, he entered the Houses of Parliament, and stood in the silent debating chamber of the Commons, breathing the stale air. However, there was not the least explanation anywhere of what had taken place. In the streets of the city he saw not a single cat or dog. It was only when he visited London Zoo that he found that the birds still remained within their cages. They seemed delighted to see B, but flew off with famished cries when he unlocked the bars.

So at least he had a kind of companionship. During the next month, and throughout the summer, B continued his preparations for survival. He drove as far north as Birmingham without seeing a soul, then drove down to the south coast and followed the road from Brighton to Dover. Standing on the cliffs, he gazed at the distant shoreline of France. In the marina he chose a motor-boat with a full tank of fuel, and set out across the calm sea, now free of the customary pleasure-craft, petroleum tankers and cross-Channel ferries. At Calais he wandered for an hour through the deserted streets, and in the silent shops listened in vain to telephones that never replied. Then he retraced his steps to the port and returned to England.

When the summer was followed by a mild autumn, B had established a pleasant and comfortable existence for himself. He had abundant stocks of tinned food, fuel and water with which to survive the winter. The river was nearby, clear and free of all pollution, and petrol was easy to obtain, in unlimited quantities, from the filling stations and parked cars. At the local police station he assembled a small armoury of pistols and carbines, to deal with any unexpected menace that might appear.

But his only visitors were the birds, and he scattered handfuls of rice and seeds on the lawn of his garden and on those of his former neighbours. Already he had begun to forget them, and Shepperton soon became an extraordinary aviary, filled with birds of every species.

Thus the year ended peacefully, and B was ready to begin his true work.

THE DYING FALL

Three years have passed since the collapse of the Tower of Pisa, but only now can I accept the crucial role that I played in the destruction of this unique landmark. Over twenty tourists died as the thousands of tons of marble lost their grasp on the air and collapsed to the ground. Among them was my wife Elaine, who had climbed to the topmost tier and was looking down at me when the first visible crack appeared in the tower's base. Never were tragedy and triumph so intimately joined, as if Elaine's pride in braving the worn and slippery stairs had been punished by the unseen forces that had sustained this unbalanced mass of masonry for so many centuries.

I realise now that another element – farce – was present on that day. By chance a passing tourist on the steps of the cathedral had taken a photograph of the tower as the crack reached the third floor and a tell-tale section of cornice began its fall to earth. The photograph, endlessly published throughout the world, clearly shows the four startled tourists on the uppermost deck. Three of them are leaning back on their heels, hands raised to grip the sky, aware that the ancient campanile has moved under their feet.

Elaine, alone, has already seized the rail, and is staring at the grass waiting for her nearly two hundred feet below. Using a magnifying glass, one can see that, true to her quirky and mocking character, she shows almost no alarm. Her eyes have noticed the falling cornice, and I like to think that she is already planning to sue the municipality of Pisa for neglecting the safety of its tourists, and is collecting evidence that in due course she will present to her lawyers.

The dozen or so tourists visible on the lower floors are still making their way around its canted decks, groping past the narrow columns as they climb the 300 steps to the roof. A father and his young daughter wave to the tourists below them, two Italian sailors in uniform play the fool for their girl-friends, feigning an attack of giddiness, and an elderly couple pause to rest after climbing to the first floor, determined to complete the ascent. None of them sees the falling cornice and the fine cascade of powdered mortar.

The only figure on the ground who is aware of the imminent catastrophe is a man in a white jacket and panama hat who stands at the foot of the tower, both hands raised to the marble flank. His face is hidden, but his arms are braced against the shifting stone, his back arched above his straining legs. We can see that in his desperate way he is trying to hold upright the collapsing tower that is about to obliterate him.

Or so everyone assumes. The newspaper caption writers, the commentators on TV documentaries, all commend the bravery of this solitary figure. Surpris-

ingly, he has never been identified, and neither his hat nor his white jacket were found in the mountain of rubble that was later removed, stone by stone, from the unhappy site.

But was he trying to support the tower or, rather, helping it on its way? I, of course, can answer the question, since I am the man in the panama hat, the husband at whom Elaine, in the last moments of her life, so triumphantly stares.

Needless to say, I fled to safety, running through the dust and the shrieking tourists as the ground trembled and a cataract of masonry fell from the air. A vast cloud of pulverised marble enveloped the square, and I remember stumbling past the horror-stricken waiters and taxi-drivers who gazed at this field of devastation – not only had the tower vanished, but it had taken their livelihoods with it. Had they known that I was responsible they would have lynched me on the spot, and to this day I have kept silent, still gripped by my guilt over so many deaths, all but one of them entirely innocent.

In a sense the destruction of the tower was inscribed days beforehand in our unhappy tour of Tuscany. Our marriage, problematic from the start, had grown increasingly fraught during the previous year. Elaine had married me on the rebound, to spite an unfaithful lover, but soon decided that her husband, a classics lecturer at a minor university, was minor in all other respects. I was losing my students in a ferment of curriculum changes that would eventually lead to the descheduling of Latin and Greek and their replacement by cultural and media studies. My refusal to sue the university, Elaine decided, was a sign of my innate weakness, a frailty that soon extended to the marriage bed.

Claiming that our union was unconsummated, she consulted a solicitor with a view to divorcing me, but was persuaded to make a last effort to save the relationship. Our marriage became a series of negotiated truces, in which I would yield more and more territory. Still hoping to salvage something, and return to the few weeks of happiness we had known after the wedding, I suggested a holiday in Italy. I had arranged to give three lectures at the University of Florence, which would pay for our air fares, and then we would be free to enjoy ourselves in the Tuscan countryside.

Elaine agreed, but only grudgingly – her first husband had been a modernist architect, and she always claimed to dislike the past, the territory I had made my own, and pretended to prefer California and Texas. But soon after we landed at Pisa airport and took the train to Florence her interest in the Italian renaissance revived in a way that I found almost mysterious. Once I had given my lectures she threw us into a hectic round of tourist activities. Tirelessly she insisted on visiting every church and baptistry, every museum and cathedral. I was puzzled by this passion for the past until I realised that our visits to these historic sites had exposed yet another of my weaknesses.

As we took the creaking lift to the dome of Florence cathedral Elaine discovered that I was afraid of heights, a fear that I had never noticed in myself but which she immediately set out to maximise. Unsettled by the looming space

below the dome, I could barely force myself from the lift. My eyes seemed unwilling to focus on the curving walls, and I felt my heart-beat fall away, leaving me on the edge of a fainting fit.

Gesticulating to Elaine, I refused to follow her around the narrow gallery. Scarcely able to breathe, I waited as she proudly circled the dome, calling to me in a insistent voice that embarrassed me in front of the other tourists. Yet as we left the cathedral she became strangely solicitous, holding my arm in a concerned and reassuring way. Far from deriding me, she seemed genuinely alarmed by my moment of panic.

Despite this show of affection, I soon noticed that our tour of Tuscany had become a series of vertical ascents. No battlement existed that we did not scale, no worn steps that we did not climb. At the Palazzo Vecchio, under the pretext of showing me the spectacular view over the city, she forced me to lean through the very windows from which Lorenzo de Medici had suspended the strangled plotters against his rule. I saw Siena cathedral from the roof down, almost breathing my last in the confined bell-tower. And all the while Elaine would watch me with her affectionate and lingering smile, like an older sister observing a timid sibling. Was she trying to cure me of my fear of heights, or to rub in my sense of my own inadequacy?

A climax of sorts came at San Gimignano, that surrealist township of towers constructed during the 14th century by rival families within this independent city state. As Elaine moved tirelessly from one tower to the next, I retreated to a cafe beside the cathedral with its macabre images of hell. All afternoon she gazed at the towers, admiring these symbols of an erect masculinity of which her husband was incapable, then sat beaming at me as the tourist coach carried us to Florence.

Three days later, when we arrived in Pisa for our London flight, I had been routed by Elaine's campaign. We were both eager to return to England, I to the safety of my university office, she to her solicitor. We had packed in silence, and reached Pisa airport with two hours to spare before our flight. Inevitably we found ourselves taking a taxi into the city. Reading from her guide-book, Elaine described the baptistry and cathedral in glowing terms, but I knew that our real destination was the nearby campanile, this marble phallus that seemed to excite her even more than the towers of San Gimignano.

I stepped from the taxi and stared up at the dizzying structure with its dangerously canted floors. Without a word, Elaine strode away from me towards the tower. She paid her entrance fee and began to climb the steps behind two uniformed sailors and a father with his daughter. As she reached each tier she looked down at me with her affectionate but knowing smirk, her contempt rising with each successive storey.

I stood on the cathedral steps, still surprised by the steep inclination of the tower, some 17 feet from the vertical. Despite myself, I wished that the structure, tilting each year by a few added millimetres, would decide on this exact moment for its long-predicted collapse.

Then, as Elaine reached the penultimate tier, I found myself needing to

touch the tower, to feel the unforgiving marble against my skin. I left the cathedral and walked across the worn grass where the tourists sat in the sun, waving to their friends high above them. Ignoring the ticket office, I strolled around the stone well that surrounded the tower. I placed my hand on the antique marble, its surface pitted with the graffiti of centuries, its veins as marmoreal as fossilised time. The tower was both too erect and too old. I pressed against the massive flank, urging it on its way.

Eight storeys above me, Elaine had reached the roof and stood beside the panting sailors. Scarcely out of breath, she seized the iron rail and smiled down at me in her most implacable way, slowly shaking her head at my weakness.

Angered by her open contempt, I pushed again at the solid marble. The wall refused to yield, but when I lifted my hand I noticed that a small crack had appeared in the surface, running away from a discoloured node of crushed limestone. Curious, I pressed again, only to see that the crack had widened. It inched upwards at a barely visible pace, then darted forward, climbing the wall like a sudden fissure in a sheet of ice. Three feet long, it crossed a decorative moulding and rose swiftly towards the cornice of the first tier.

Laughing at this, I pressed both hands at the marble drum. Immediately the crack accelerated, and I heard a distant rumble, the dark groan of an awakening creature deep within the tower. The crack was now an open fissure through which I could see the shoes of the startled old man resting before he and his wife made their way to the second storey. A fine rain of dust and crumbling mortar showered my face. The entire tower was trembling against my hands, and a section of cornice fell through the air, followed by a scatter of fragments each larger than my fist.

The Tower of Pisa was about to fall. I gave it one last push, both arms outstretched, and felt the tortured rumbling as somewhere the spine of this great edifice began to crack. I stepped back, aware that the building was about to collapse onto me, and then looked up at the roof, where Elaine was clinging to the iron rail.

The tower buckled, its columns spilling like skittled pins at a bowling alley. In the last moments, as Elaine was pitched over the rail, I saw her face falling towards me, and an expression of anger that unmistakably changed, as she noticed me far below her, to one of triumph.

A second Tower of Pisa is now rising on the site of the first, financed by the world-wide appeal launched soon after the tragedy. The structure, this time mounted on an immovable concrete base, has reached the third storey and already reveals the modest inclination designed into it. This tower, supported by a rigid steel armature, will never fall, and within a few decades most visitors will have forgotten that it is no more than a replica.

For me, though, the original tower remains as real as ever in my mind. I often wake from terrifying dreams as the tons of marble hurtle towards me. Then I remind myself that it was Elaine who died on that day. I remember the expression on her face, the fierce pride that lit her eyes.

Did she feel that she had at last triumphed over me, and was happy to see me crushed by the cascade of tumbling columns? I remember the stones pelting my shoulders while I tried vainly to step back from the tower. At the last moment, as an amateur video-film reveals, the structure seemed to buckle, twisting itself in a desperate attempt to remain upright. It slewed away from me, sweeping Elaine, the collapsing masonry and the cartwheeling columns towards the ground by the cathedral steps.

I escaped, but that expression of triumph on Elaine's face still puzzles me. Had she seen me pushing against the tower and assumed that I was responsible for its collapse? Was she proud of me for hating her so fiercely, and for at last stirring from my impotence to take my revenge? Perhaps only in her death did we truly come together, and the Tower of Pisa served a purpose for which it had waited for so many centuries.

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J.G. Ballard was born in Shanghai in 1930, interned in a Japanese prison camp from 1943 to 1945, and lived in England from 1946 until his death in London in 2009. He is the author of nineteen novels, including *Empire of the Sun*, *The Drowned World*, and *Crash*, many of them made into major films.

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